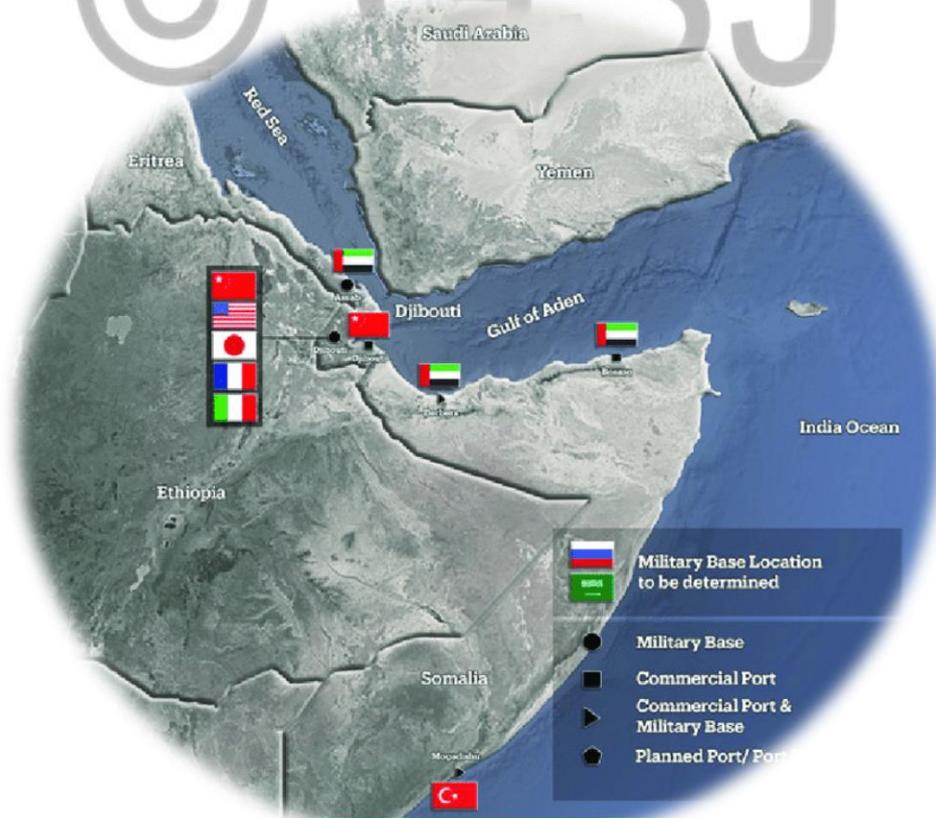www.globalscientificjournal.com

Doctor of Philosophy with Specialization in PEACE, Governance and DEVELOPMENT (PGD)

Geopolitical Dynamics of the Red Sea and Its Impact on Somali National Unity

Source: *TRT world research centre*

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Table of Contents

Caption*:*

This figure illustrates the geopolitical dynamics of the Red Sea region, highlighting Somalia's strategic maritime location along the Gulf of Aden and its proximity to key international shipping lanes. The map underscores how external geopolitical competition and maritime security considerations intersect with Somalia's national unity and state sovereignty.

Source: *Adapted from open-source geopolitical and maritime datasets, including the World Bank, UNEP, International Maritime Organization (IMO), and Natural Earth.*

Introduction

Political geography examines the relationship between geography and politics, focusing on how spatial factors—such as geographic location, bodies of water (including seas and rivers), airspace, and natural resources—shape political power, influence state behaviour, and affect relations among peoples, ethnic groups, and political systems at both domestic and international levels (Agnew, 2016). It also analyses political boundaries, territorially driven conflicts, and the ways in which geographic conditions influence international relations and regional power structures. Beyond natural geographic determinants, political geography has been profoundly shaped by historical processes such as Western colonialism from the twentieth century onward, the political and territorial legacies of which continue to influence governance, conflict, and state formation across Africa, Asia, and parts of South America (Clapham, 2017).

The Red Sea occupies a central strategic position within the Horn of Africa and constitutes one of the world's most important maritime corridors, linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea through the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal. A substantial proportion of global maritime trade—particularly energy supplies and commercial goods connecting Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas—passes through this corridor, granting the Red Sea exceptional geopolitical and economic significance (UNCTAD, 2022; Kaplan, 2010).

The Red Sea is bordered by several states of direct relevance to Somalia, including Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, as well as strategically significant islands such as Socotra, which fall under the authority of neighbouring states. As a result, the Red Sea has become a focal point of regional strategic competition, foreign military presence, and competing political interests among both regional and global powers (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

In addition to its strategic maritime role, the Red Sea contains valuable natural resources, including fisheries, offshore hydrocarbons, and other marine assets that are critical to the economic and security interests of coastal states and the broader international community. Control over these resources and the sea lanes through which they are transported has intensified geopolitical rivalry and has contributed to persistent instability in the surrounding region (World Bank, 2020; IMO, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to examine how the political geography of the Red Sea has influenced Somalia's national unity, with particular attention to the interaction between geographic location, maritime resources, and Somalia's contemporary political environment. The study specifically analyses the impact of foreign interventions and geopolitical

competition—especially the roles played by external factors such as Israel and the United Arab Emirates—on Somalia's internal cohesion and political stability (Menkhaus, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2023). It explores how both conflict and cooperation among Red Sea littoral states have shaped Somalia's political trajectory and, in many cases, contributed to the erosion of national unity.

Furthermore, this research highlights the opportunities and challenges associated with the Red Sea in relation to regional security, economic development, and political stability, particularly as they affect Somalia and its neighbouring states. By situating Somalia within the broader Red Sea geopolitical framework, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how strategic maritime geography intersects with state-building, sovereignty, and national cohesion. Accordingly, the paper underscores the importance of the Red Sea not only as a site of global strategic competition but also as a critical factor shaping Somalia's historical experience, contemporary politics, and prospects for durable national unity.

Abstract

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the geopolitical dynamics of the Red Sea region, emphasizing its strategic significance as a vital maritime corridor linking Africa, Asia, and Europe. It examines the interaction of power rivalries, economic interests, and military presence among regional and global actors and assesses how these dynamics influence political stability and security in the surrounding states.

Somalia occupies a critical position within this geopolitical environment due to its extensive coastline along the Gulf of Aden and its proximity to the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Despite this strategic advantage, Somalia faces persistent challenges, including maritime disputes, political fragmentation, and foreign interventions that threaten its sovereignty and national unity. The engagement of major global powers such as the United States and China, alongside regional actors including the United Arab Emirates and Israel, further complicates the regional landscape, as economic and security interests increasingly shape political alignments.

The study also examines Ethiopia's long-standing aspiration to gain access to the Red Sea, illustrating how geopolitical ambitions can generate regional tensions, particularly in relation to Somalia and Eritrea. These dynamics are compounded by interventions in conflict zones such as Yemen and Sudan, drawing in additional regional actors, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Türkiye. At the same time, the Red Sea's central role in global energy transport and

commercial shipping underscores the importance of infrastructure development and effective maritime security to ensure the uninterrupted flow of trade.

The paper argues that enhanced regional cooperation and coherent national maritime governance are essential for mitigating instability and strengthening Somalia's unity. By developing integrated policies for managing maritime resources, reinforcing diplomatic engagement, and resisting destabilizing external interference, Somalia can transform its strategic location in the Red Sea from a source of vulnerability into a foundation for national cohesion and sustainable development.

History of the Geography of the Red Sea

Location of the Red Sea

The Red Sea is a major body of water located between the African continent and the Arabian Peninsula, extending from the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the south to the Suez Canal in the north. It occupies a highly strategic geographic position linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, thereby forming a critical component of the global maritime system (Kaplan, 2010; UNCTAD, 2022). Through its connection with the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal, the Red Sea facilitates the movement of commercial and energy shipments between Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Atlantic world.

Geographically, the Red Sea lies adjacent to several states of strategic importance to Somalia, including Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. In addition, a number of strategically significant islands—most notably Socotra—are located within or near the Red Sea and adjacent maritime zones. These islands enhance the military, economic, and geopolitical value of the region and have increasingly attracted international attention due to their proximity to major shipping lanes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; IMO, 2021).

As a result of this unique geographic position, the Red Sea has become a focal point of regional and global strategic competition, influencing political decision-making, security policies, and economic planning across the Horn of Africa and the Middle East.

Countries Bordering the Red Sea

The states bordering the Red Sea possess coastlines that are central to the region's geopolitical, economic, and security significance. These countries include Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, each of which derives strategic advantages from its access to this vital maritime corridor.

Somalia: occupies a strategically significant position within the broader Red Sea system due to its proximity to the Bab al-Mandab Strait and its extensive coastline along the Gulf of Aden. Somalia hosts major ports such as Berbera, Zeila (Seylac), and Bosaso, which serve as important gateways for regional and international trade. The Somali maritime zone is also rich in natural resources, including fisheries and offshore hydrocarbon potential. Due to its geographic location, Somalia has attracted sustained interest from major global powers, many of which maintain military or security presences in the wider region, intensifying competition over control of strategic maritime routes (Menkhaus, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Djibouti: holds one of the most strategically valuable coastlines along the Red Sea. Its location at the entrance to the Bab al-Mandab Strait has enabled it to host multiple foreign military bases operated by global powers such as the United States, France, and China. This concentration of military presence reflects the Red Sea's importance as a security and trade corridor and underscores Djibouti's central role in global maritime security architecture (Kaplan, 2010; Bueger, 2015).

Eritrea: possesses a significant Red Sea coastline that provides direct access to major maritime routes. Its ports and coastal areas have historically played an important role in regional trade and security dynamics, making Eritrea a key factor in Red Sea geopolitics despite its relatively limited economic capacity (Clapham, 2017).

Sudan: controls a substantial stretch of the western Red Sea coast and hosts strategically important ports, most notably Port Sudan. Sudan's maritime access enhances its regional economic potential but has also exposed it to geopolitical competition and external intervention, particularly during periods of internal political instability (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Yemen: located on the Arabian Peninsula side of the Red Sea, occupies a pivotal position along the southern entrance to the sea. Its major ports—including Hodeida, Aden, and Mukalla—are critical to regional trade and humanitarian access. However,

prolonged conflict has significantly weakened Yemen's ability to secure its coastline, with serious implications for Red Sea maritime security (UNCTAD, 2022; IMO, 2021).

Saudi Arabia: maintains an extensive Red Sea coastline that supports major commercial ports and energy infrastructure. The Red Sea is central to Saudi Arabia's economic diversification strategies and regional security policies, particularly in relation to maritime trade and energy exports (Kaplan, 2010).

Collectively, the coastlines of these states form a continuous strategic maritime zone whose stability is essential to global trade, energy security, and regional political order.

Source: *Nations Online Project (2024). Red Sea political and physical map (WGS84 datum).*

The Global System and the Red Sea: Socio-Economic and Security Relations

The Red Sea holds multidimensional global significance as a central maritime crossroads linking Africa, Asia, and Europe. It constitutes one of the most important corridors for international trade, energy transportation, and strategic mobility, making it indispensable to the

functioning of the global economic system (UNCTAD, 2022). From an economic perspective, the Red Sea serves as a primary route for the transportation of oil, liquefied natural gas, and other critical commodities, particularly those originating from the Middle East. A high volume of commercial shipping transits the Red Sea daily, connecting supply chains that extend from the Strait of Hormuz and the Indian Ocean through the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal to European and Atlantic markets (World Bank, 2020). In security terms, the Red Sea has become a key theatre for military operations, counter-piracy initiatives, counter-terrorism efforts, and strategic power projection. The presence of foreign naval forces and military bases reflects growing concern over threats such as piracy, illicit trafficking, and regional instability (Bueger, 2015; IMO, 2021).

Both regional and global actors are increasingly invested in safeguarding maritime routes and ensuring freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. While these efforts have encouraged security cooperation and alliance-building, they have also generated persistent geopolitical competition and recurring political tensions among Red Sea littoral states, including Somalia. These dynamics continue to shape the region's stability and directly influence the political and security environment of the Horn of Africa.

Major Strategic Maritime Routes of the Red Sea (Commercial Sea Lanes)

The Red Sea constitutes one of the most critical maritime corridors in the global trading system, serving as a primary route for the transportation of oil, energy products, and other essential commodities. Its strategic commercial sea lanes facilitate the movement of goods between Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, making the region indispensable to global economic stability and energy security (Kaplan, 2010; UNCTAD, 2022). Among the most significant maritime routes within the Red Sea are the following:

- **The Bab al-Mandab Strait:** represents one of the world's most strategically important maritime chokepoints. It connects the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Gulf of Aden and is transited daily by hundreds of oil tankers and commercial vessels. A substantial portion of Middle Eastern energy exports and manufactured goods destined for European and transatlantic markets passes through this narrow strait, rendering it a focal point of global maritime security concerns and geopolitical competition (IMO, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

- **Port Routes of Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, and Eritrea:** also play a critical role in facilitating regional and international trade. Key ports include Berbera, Bosaso, and

Zeila (Somalia); Doraleh and Djibouti Port (Djibouti); Port Sudan (Sudan); and Massawa (Eritrea). These ports function as essential gateways for supply chains, humanitarian assistance, and commercial exchange. However, they are simultaneously arenas of intense geopolitical rivalry, as regional and global actors compete for influence, investment, and control. Such competition has, at times, undermined economic development, disrupted access to essential goods, and exacerbated political instability across the Red Sea region (Menkhaus, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Alternative shipping route avoiding Red Sea

— Using Red Sea/Suez Canal 10,000 nautical miles (18,520km) 25.5 days*

— Around Cape of Good Hope 13,500 nautical miles (25,002km) 34 days*

*Based on ultra large container vessel's average speed of 16.48 knots

Source: Veson Nautical

- **The Suez Canal:** although not entirely contained within the Red Sea, forms an integral component of the Red Sea maritime system. Located at the northern terminus of the sea, the canal connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea and significantly enhances the strategic and commercial value of the entire corridor. Its role in shortening global shipping routes has attracted sustained interest from both regional and global powers, many of which seek to establish political, economic, or military footholds along the Red Sea littoral. Actors such as Israel and Ethiopia—despite Ethiopia's landlocked

status—have increasingly sought influence within this strategic maritime space (Kaplan, 2010; Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Collectively, these maritime routes play a decisive role in shaping global trade flows and regional economic systems, while simultaneously influencing political decision-making processes and the internal stability of Red Sea littoral states.

Geopolitical Boundaries of the Red Sea

The geopolitical boundaries of the Red Sea consist of a complex combination of maritime and terrestrial borders shared among coastal states. These boundaries are embedded within a highly contested geopolitical environment, particularly involving oil- and trade-dependent states whose economic security is closely tied to uninterrupted access to maritime routes. Gulf states—most notably Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar—have emerged as prominent actors in this space, engaging in competition through security partnerships, port investments, administrative influence, and regional diplomatic initiatives (Clapham, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2022).

Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, and Yemen possess overlapping maritime boundaries, which have periodically generated disputes over sovereignty, access to sea lanes, and the exploitation of natural resources such as fisheries and offshore hydrocarbons. Control of the Bab al-Mandab Strait remains a particularly sensitive issue, as it represents both an economic lifeline and a strategic security asset. These disputes are further compounded by maritime piracy and illicit activities, which are often intertwined with broader geopolitical agendas and the strategic interests of major powers seeking to expand their presence in the region (Bueger, 2015; IMO, 2021).

Although maritime boundaries in the Red Sea have been addressed through international legal frameworks, including conventions under the auspices of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), significant disputes persist due to incomplete delimitation, contested sovereignty claims, and unequal enforcement mechanisms. For example, Djibouti and Eritrea have experienced recurrent maritime territorial tensions, further complicated by Ethiopia's strategic aspirations to gain access to the Red Sea. As a landlocked state, Ethiopia has sought to advance its interests through diplomatic and political engagement with neighbouring states, including Somalia and Eritrea, often generating regional controversy and resistance (International Crisis Group, 2023).

In recent years, Ethiopia's involvement has added a new layer of complexity to Red Sea geopolitics, as its attempts to leverage existing disputes have heightened regional sensitivities and contributed to diplomatic friction among Red Sea littoral states.

Regional Conflicts and Cooperation

Political conflict in the Red Sea region arises from a combination of interrelated factors, including competition over port development, natural resource exploitation, maritime boundary delimitation, and the presence of foreign military forces. Several Red Sea states have engaged in direct rivalries, exemplified by historical disputes between Djibouti and Eritrea, as well as between Sudan and Eritrea. These rivalries have, at times, escalated into armed confrontations and maritime boundary disputes, undermining regional stability (Clapham, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2022).

Despite these challenges, the Red Sea region has also witnessed notable instances of cooperation among coastal states. Collaborative efforts include agreements on maritime security, protection of sea lanes, trade facilitation, fisheries management, and joint initiatives to combat piracy and terrorism. Such cooperation is frequently supported by international organizations and external partners with a vested interest in maintaining regional stability, including the African Union, the European Union, and individual European states (Bueger, 2015; IMO, 2021).

These cooperative mechanisms demonstrate the potential for collective security and economic integration in the Red Sea region, even as geopolitical rivalries continue to pose significant obstacles to long-term stability.

The Influence of Major Powers in the Red Sea Region

Regional and global powers play a decisive role in shaping the political and security dynamics of the Red Sea. Despite being a landlocked state without direct access to the sea, Ethiopia maintains significant strategic interests in the region due to its dependence on maritime trade routes for international commerce. For several decades, Ethiopia has relied primarily on the ports of Djibouti for the vast majority of its imports and exports through formal bilateral agreements, making Djibouti its principal maritime gateway (Clapham, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2023).

In January 2024, Ethiopia became embroiled in a serious diplomatic crisis following the signing of a memorandum of understanding with an administration in northern Somalia without

the consent or recognition of the Federal Government of Somalia. This development generated heightened diplomatic tensions and provoked a firm response from the Somali government, which viewed the agreement as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Subsequent diplomatic mediation by Turkey contributed to de-escalation efforts, ultimately resulting in the collapse of Ethiopia's attempt to secure maritime access through Somalia (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Following this setback, Ethiopia redirected its strategic focus toward Eritrea, advancing historical and political claims regarding access to the Red Sea coastline. These assertions revived long-standing regional tensions and contributed to renewed geopolitical uncertainty in the Horn of Africa. Despite regional resistance, Ethiopia continues to perceive itself as a central power in Red Sea geopolitics and has sought to advance its strategic objectives by cultivating political influence within neighboring states, including Somalia and Eritrea, as part of a broader effort to enhance long-term regional leverage (Clapham, 2017). Within this geopolitical context, external actors—particularly the United Arab Emirates and Israel—have been widely perceived as supporting initiatives aimed at reshaping political arrangements in Red Sea littoral states. The United Arab Emirates, in particular, has emerged as a prominent external actor pursuing strategic objectives through port investments, security partnerships, and political engagement. In several cases, these initiatives have been interpreted by regional governments as attempts to encourage political fragmentation or weaken central state authority, prompting strong resistance at both regional and international levels (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Concerns over external intervention intensified among Red Sea states, leading key regional powers—most notably Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with diplomatic support from Turkey—to intervene politically and strategically in order to counter perceived threats to regional stability. These interventions significantly altered the balance of influence in the region and resulted in diplomatic and strategic setbacks for the United Arab Emirates in countries such as Somalia and Yemen, where its role became increasingly contested (Kaplan, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Sudan occupies a particularly critical position in Red Sea geopolitics due to its strategic maritime access through Port Sudan. While Sudan has sought to strengthen trade and security cooperation with other Red Sea states, persistent internal political instability has made it vulnerable to external influence and intervention. Regional observers have frequently

identified indirect or proxy involvement by foreign actors seeking to exploit Sudan's strategic location for geopolitical advantage (Clapham, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2022).

Yemen represents another pivotal state in the Red Sea maritime system. Prolonged internal conflict has severely weakened Yemen's ability to secure its coastline and safeguard maritime routes. Although the United Arab Emirates initially aligned with Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni conflict, strategic divergences later emerged. Saudi Arabia increasingly viewed Emirati actions as posing risks to regional security, leading to political and military confrontations that ultimately curtailed the UAE's role in Yemen. Had competing strategies succeeded, they could have posed significant threats to Red Sea maritime security and international shipping (UNCTAD, 2022; IMO, 2021).

More broadly, the United Arab Emirates has sought to project itself as a strategic maritime power in the Red Sea and Gulf regions, often engaging states through port development initiatives and maritime security cooperation. While such engagements are frequently welcomed initially, host governments have, in several cases, reassessed their positions after perceiving political interference or security practices that undermine national sovereignty. This dynamic has resulted in restrictions or expulsions of Emirati influence in countries including Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, and Libya (International Crisis Group, 2023).

A central component of the UAE's regional strategy has been the protection of its major commercial ports—particularly Jebel Ali—by limiting the development of competing ports along the Red Sea. This objective has driven competition over port concessions and infrastructure projects, especially with Turkey. Allegations of indirect support for armed groups in some conflict-affected states have further contributed to perceptions of destabilizing intervention, particularly in Libya, Sudan, and Yemen. Somalia, however, succeeded in dismantling such networks and terminating Emirati influence, resulting in a complete breakdown of bilateral relations (Menkhaus, 2014).

Finally, major global powers—including the United States, China, France, and Russia—maintain a significant and continuous presence in the Red Sea region. Through military bases, naval deployments, and security operations, these states seek to protect trade routes, safeguard investments, and advance broader strategic interests within the Red Sea and Gulf geopolitical framework. Their involvement underscores the region's centrality to global security and economic systems, while also contributing to the complexity and intensity of geopolitical competition (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Kaplan, 2010).

The Role of Somalia in the Red Sea Region

Somalia is among the most strategically significant states influencing the Red Sea region due to its extensive coastline along the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, stretching from its northwestern border with Djibouti eastward toward the Indian Ocean. Although Somalia does not lie directly on the Red Sea itself, its geographic proximity to the Bab al-Mandab Strait—the southern gateway to the Red Sea—grants it substantial strategic relevance within the broader Red Sea maritime system (Kaplan, 2010; UNCTAD, 2022).

Somalia's geographic position enables it to exert considerable influence over regional political, economic, and security dynamics in the Horn of Africa. The country possesses vast maritime resources and a long historical engagement with seaborne trade, fisheries, and maritime navigation, all of which are integral to Red Sea commerce and global shipping networks. A significant proportion of international trade passing through the Red Sea transits near Somalia's northern coastline via the Gulf of Aden, underscoring Somalia's importance within global maritime supply chains (World Bank, 2020; IMO, 2021).

At the regional and international levels, Somalia is widely regarded as a potential cornerstone for future economic and security cooperation between the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Its geographic position linking Africa and Asia positions it as a key factor in maritime security initiatives, trade facilitation, energy transportation routes, and regional economic integration frameworks (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Menkhaus, 2014).

However, persistent internal political instability, weak maritime governance, and ongoing security challenges have constrained Somalia's ability to fully capitalize on its strategic maritime advantages. Fragmented political authority and limited institutional capacity have hindered effective control of coastal territories, ports, and maritime resources, reducing Somalia's influence within regional maritime governance structures (International Crisis Group, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires sustained national political consensus, institutional strengthening, and coordinated international support aimed at reinforcing Somalia's capacity to manage its maritime domain effectively.

Strategic Maritime Waterways and the Unity of Somalia

Somalia's strategic position within the Red Sea maritime system is closely linked to the issue of national unity. Effective governance of maritime corridors—particularly those adjacent to the Bab al-Mandab Strait—requires a unified state authority capable of exercising sovereignty over coastal areas, ports, and marine resources. Political fragmentation weakens Somalia's

capacity to secure these strategic waterways, thereby diminishing its leverage in regional and international maritime affairs (Menkhaus, 2014).

Historically, the strategic value of Somalia's coastline has attracted external actors seeking access to key shipping lanes and port infrastructure. In the absence of strong national cohesion, such external interests risk deepening internal divisions by encouraging sub-national agreements, competing port concessions, and parallel security arrangements. These dynamics undermine state sovereignty and pose direct challenges to Somalia's territorial integrity and political unity (Clapham, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Conversely, a unified Somalia stands to benefit substantially from its maritime geography. National cohesion enables coordinated maritime governance, equitable distribution of revenues derived from ports and sea-based trade, and effective participation in regional security and economic cooperation frameworks. Such unity enhances Somalia's negotiating position with regional and global partners, allowing engagement based on national interests rather than fragmented local agendas (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Moreover, maritime security is inseparable from internal political stability. Threats such as piracy, illicit trafficking, and foreign interference tend to proliferate in environments characterized by weak governance and political fragmentation. Strengthening Somalia's national unity therefore contributes not only to domestic stability but also to the security of the wider Red Sea maritime system, reinforcing Somalia's role as a responsible and indispensable regional actor (Bueger, 2015; IMO, 2021).

In this context, Somalia's unity should be understood not merely as a domestic political objective but as a strategic necessity. Preserving national cohesion enhances the country's ability to protect its maritime interests, regulate external engagement, and transform its geographic position from a source of vulnerability into a foundation for long-term political stability, economic development, and regional integration.

Somalia's Red Sea Context and National Unity

Somalia's position within the broader Red Sea maritime system is closely intertwined with the question of national unity. Effective control, governance, and utilization of Somalia's northern coastline—particularly along the Gulf of Aden and in proximity to the Bab al-Mandab Strait—require a unified and capable state authority able to exercise sovereignty over maritime territory, ports, and natural resources. Fragmentation of political authority undermines

Somalia's capacity to manage these strategic coastal zones, exposing them to external influence, competing local interests, and uncoordinated maritime arrangements that weaken national cohesion (Samatar, 2017; Marchal, 2020).

The strategic and economic value of Somalia's coastline has long attracted regional and international actors seeking access to ports, trade corridors, and maritime security partnerships. In the absence of national unity, such engagement risks reinforcing internal divisions by empowering sub-national actors, encouraging parallel port agreements, and generating fragmented security architectures. These dynamics erode state sovereignty and pose serious challenges to Somalia's territorial integrity and long-term political stability (Hoehne, 2015; Williams, 2018).

Conversely, a unified Somalia would be better positioned to transform its maritime geography from a source of vulnerability into a foundation for national integration and economic development. Inclusive and centralized maritime governance would facilitate equitable distribution of revenues derived from fisheries, port services, and offshore resources, thereby reducing regional grievances and strengthening national solidarity. Unity would also enhance Somalia's negotiating leverage with regional and global partners, ensuring that cooperation in maritime security, trade, and investment aligns with national priorities rather than fragmented local agendas (Lewis, 2008; Samatar, 2017). Moreover, maritime security and national unity are mutually reinforcing. Insecure coastal environments—characterized by piracy, illicit trafficking, and foreign interference—tend to flourish in contexts of political fragmentation. Strengthening Somalia's unity therefore contributes directly to securing its maritime domain, while effective maritime governance reinforces state legitimacy and public trust. Safeguarding Somalia's role within the Red Sea–Gulf of Aden corridor is thus not merely a technical or economic task but a core political project tied to state-building and national cohesion (Marchal, 2020).

Ultimately, Somalia's unity constitutes a strategic prerequisite for benefiting fully from its geographic proximity to the Red Sea. Preserving national cohesion enables Somalia to protect its maritime interests, regulate external engagement, and play a constructive role in regional security and economic integration. Without unity, Somalia's coastline risks becoming a focal point of division and external competition; with unity, it can serve as a cornerstone for stability, development, and cooperation in the Horn of Africa.

Natural Resources and the Unity of Somalia

The governance of Somalia's marine natural resources is fundamentally linked to national unity. Fisheries, offshore hydrocarbons, and seabed resources function not only as economic assets but also as political instruments capable of reinforcing cohesion or deepening fragmentation, depending on how they are managed. In fragile and post-conflict states such as Somalia, resource governance plays a decisive role in shaping state legitimacy, intergovernmental relations, and national integration (Ross, 2012; Lujala & Rustad, 2018).

Effective, nationally coordinated, and inclusive governance of maritime resources strengthens unity by anchoring ownership and decision-making authority at the national level while ensuring equitable benefit-sharing with federal member states. Transparent fisheries management, offshore licensing, and revenue collection enhance public trust and reduce perceptions of marginalization among coastal communities, thereby reinforcing loyalty to federal institutions (World Bank, 2020). Conversely, fragmented or weak resource governance creates incentives for political division. Competing claims over fishing rights, port revenues, or offshore exploration blocks can intensify tensions between federal and regional authorities. In such contexts, external actors may exploit institutional gaps by negotiating directly with sub-national entities, undermining sovereignty and accelerating political fragmentation. These dynamics have historically contributed to instability in Somalia's coastal regions and weakened its collective bargaining power in international maritime affairs (Hoehne, 2015).

The fisheries sector illustrates this relationship clearly. Nationally coordinated fisheries governance can generate employment, enhance food security, and reduce economic grievances that often fuel conflict. By contrast, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing— enabled by weak enforcement—deprives coastal communities of livelihoods and fuels resentment toward the state. Strengthening maritime law enforcement and fisheries governance therefore serves both economic development and national unity (FAO, 2018).

Offshore hydrocarbon development similarly carries profound implications for Somalia's cohesion. While oil and gas revenues offer potential financing for reconstruction and state-building, they also pose risks if governance frameworks are unclear or revenues are inequitably distributed. A clear constitutional and legal framework governing offshore resource ownership, revenue-sharing, and environmental protection is essential to prevent resource-driven conflict. When resource benefits are perceived as national assets serving collective interests, they can

reinforce unity; when captured by elites or regions, they risk becoming sources of division (Ross, 2012).

Ultimately, Somalia's marine natural resources represent a strategic opportunity to consolidate unity through inclusive economic growth and institutional strengthening. Embedding resource governance within transparent and accountable national frameworks can transform maritime wealth into a foundation for political cohesion, social stability, and long-term peace.

The Impact of Red Sea Political Dynamics and Security on Somalia

The Red Sea exerts a decisive influence on Somalia's internal political and security environment. While the region presents substantial economic and strategic opportunities, it is also characterized by persistent threats that constrain Somalia's ability to benefit fully from its maritime position. These threats are closely linked to Somalia's political institutions, security capacity, and national unity (Williams, 2018).

Maritime and Coastal Security

Maritime and coastal security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is challenged by piracy, irregular migration, and extremist activity, all of which directly affect Somalia's governance capacity. Following the collapse of Somalia's central state in 1991, the ability to secure territorial waters deteriorated significantly, creating opportunities for criminal and violent non-state actors. This prolonged security vacuum has undermined Somalia's capacity to protect strategic sea lanes, ports, and coastal infrastructure (Hansen, 2011). Strengthening Somalia's maritime security through institutional reform, naval capacity development, and international cooperation is therefore essential for both national and regional stability. Security partnerships—such as bilateral agreements with Türkiye and multilateral maritime initiatives—demonstrate the importance of cooperative security architectures in safeguarding Somalia's coastline and ensuring the safety of international shipping (Bueger, 2015).

Internal Political Fragmentation and Its Implications for Maritime Governance

Internal Political Fragmentation

Internal political divisions between the Federal Government of Somalia and its federal member states have significantly complicated efforts to coordinate maritime governance and security strategies. Although the Red Sea and adjacent waters present substantial economic and strategic opportunities, persistent political instability, unresolved civil conflict, and the presence of armed non-state actors have undermined the development of a unified national approach to

maritime security and resource management. Political cohesion remains a prerequisite for effective governance of Somalia's maritime domain; fragmentation weakens state institutions, reduces intergovernmental coordination, and creates opportunities for external actors to exploit internal divisions for strategic advantage (Bradbury, 2008; Hiraal Institute, 2021).

The 4.5 Power-Sharing System

Somalia's contemporary political order is structured around a clan-based power-sharing arrangement commonly referred to as the **4.5 system**. Established following the collapse of the central state in 1991, this system allocates political representation among the four major clan families—Darod, Hawiye, Dir, and Rahanweyn—while assigning a half-share (0.5) to minority groups. Initially conceived as a conflict-management mechanism in the absence of functioning democratic institutions, the system aimed to stabilize governance by ensuring inclusive clan representation (Elmi, 2010). Despite its stabilizing intentions, the 4.5 system has produced complex and often contradictory effects on national unity. Critics argue that it has entrenched clan identity as the primary basis of political participation, institutionalized social divisions within state structures, and marginalized minority communities. Rather than fostering democratic accountability, the system has frequently facilitated patronage politics and unequal access to state resources (Menkhaus, 2018).

In the context of maritime governance and Red Sea geopolitics, the 4.5 system has constrained cohesive national decision-making. Clan-based political bargaining often overshadows national strategic priorities, complicating consensus on offshore resource agreements, port development, and maritime security cooperation. As a result, Somalia's ability to govern its maritime zones effectively and present a unified position in regional negotiations is weakened (Hashi, 2015).

Political Leadership and State Capacity

The decentralized and clan-mediated nature of Somalia's political system has further impeded the emergence of unified national leadership and effective state capacity. While the 4.5 framework facilitated elite accommodation during the early stages of state reconstruction, it has also created structural incentives for competition among political elites. These dynamics have slowed institutional reform, undermined the rule of law, and delayed the consolidation of a functional federal system capable of delivering public goods and representing citizens equitably (De Waal, 2015). Weak state capacity has particularly affected maritime governance, where effective regulation requires coordinated leadership, technical expertise, and sustained

enforcement mechanisms. In the absence of strong institutions, maritime policies remain fragmented and inconsistently implemented across regions.

Challenges to National Unity

Somalia's political environment continues to be shaped by clan affiliation, competition over limited resources, and contested political legitimacy. These dynamics translate into a range of governance challenges that directly affect national unity, including:

- ❖ Dominance of exclusionary clan-based politics

- ❖ Weak enforcement of maritime laws and contractual agreements

- ❖ Fragmented security forces and the persistence of rival militias

- ❖ Widespread perceptions of inequality in resource allocation

Together, these conditions have hindered the emergence of a cohesive national identity and allowed sub-national interests to supersede broader national priorities, particularly in the strategic domain of maritime governance (Hiraal Institute, 2021).

Addressing the Imperative for Political Reform

There is increasing recognition among Somali political actors, civil society, and international partners of the need to reform the 4.5 system. Scholars and policymakers advocate a gradual transition toward political arrangements grounded in constitutional citizenship, electoral accountability, and merit-based representation. Such reforms are viewed as essential for strengthening institutional legitimacy, promoting social inclusion, and consolidating national unity (Elmi, 2010; Menkhaus, 2018).

Political reform is also central to Somalia's capacity to engage effectively in Red Sea–related maritime governance, security cooperation, and economic development. Without institutional reform, Somalia risks remaining vulnerable to external influence and internal fragmentation.

Regional and International Cooperation

Somalia's participation in regional and international frameworks for security and development reflects both the opportunities and constraints associated with its strategic location. Cooperation with neighbouring states, regional organizations, and global partners in areas such as maritime security, legal harmonization, and economic development can support Somalia's stabilization and reinforce national unity. However, the effectiveness of such cooperation ultimately depends on Somalia's ability to strengthen its political institutions, coordinate

federal and regional authorities, and assert sovereign control over its maritime domain (United Nations Security Council, 2022).

Regional Political Dynamics and Their Impact on Somalia's National Unity

Somalia occupies a strategically significant position within the Horn of Africa, with its northern coastline extending into the Red Sea maritime system through the Gulf of Aden. This geographic location places Somalia at the intersection of regional political, economic, and security dynamics, making it a critical stakeholder in Red Sea geopolitics.

As a result, Somalia's national unity and prospects for regional development are closely connected to its capacity to leverage this strategic maritime position effectively (Buzan, Hansen, & Wæver, 2020). Somalia's engagement with the Red Sea is not merely a matter of geography but one of political strategy and institutional capability. When effectively managed, Somalia's maritime position can enhance its influence in regional diplomacy, maritime governance, and economic cooperation. Conversely, internal political fragmentation and weak institutional coordination constrain Somalia's ability to articulate and defend its national interests, diminishing its role in shaping regional political outcomes (Williams, 2018).

Somalia's Role in Regional Maritime Politics

Somalia has the potential to play a constructive and stabilizing role in regional maritime arrangements related to security cooperation, economic integration, and governance of shared sea lanes. Active participation in regional frameworks addressing maritime security, port development, fisheries management, and freedom of navigation can enable Somalia to contribute meaningfully to collective stability in the Red Sea and the wider Horn of Africa (Hansen, 2011).

Regional cooperation on Red Sea governance has become increasingly important due to intensifying geopolitical competition, the growing militarization of coastal zones, and the centrality of global trade routes passing through the region. A unified Somali state is better positioned to negotiate equitable agreements, safeguard maritime sovereignty, and prevent external actors from exploiting internal political divisions for strategic advantage (Møller, 2019).

National Unity as a Prerequisite for Regional Influence

Somalia's ability to benefit from its strategic Red Sea position is directly linked to its internal political cohesion. National unity enhances the legitimacy of Somalia's foreign policy,

strengthens institutional credibility, and enables coordinated decision-making across federal and regional authorities. In contrast, political, clan-based, or institutional fragmentation weakens Somalia's negotiating capacity and limits its influence in regional affairs (Lewis, 2008).

A unified Somalia is more capable of:

- Articulating a coherent national maritime policy;

- Coordinating federal and regional authorities on coastal and port governance;

- Managing revenues from maritime trade and natural resources equitably; and

- Exercising greater diplomatic leverage in regional and international forums.

Without national unity, Somalia risks marginalization in regional decision-making processes despite its strategic geographic importance.

Participation in International Maritime Institutions

There is a growing imperative for Somalia to engage systematically with international and regional maritime institutions responsible for regulating global sea lanes and maritime security. Active participation in these platforms enables Somalia to defend its national interests, contribute to international norm-setting, and enhance its standing within the global maritime community (Kraska, 2011). Engagement with organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and United Nations–led maritime initiatives can significantly strengthen Somalia's maritime governance capacity while reinforcing its sovereignty. However, the effectiveness of such engagement ultimately depends on internal political consensus, institutional coherence, and a shared national vision regarding Somalia's role in the Red Sea region (United Nations, 2021).

Aligning Regional Political Developments with National Unity Goals

Somalia's strategic position within the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden maritime system has the potential to function as a unifying national asset rather than a source of internal competition. When governed through inclusive institutional frameworks and transparent decision-making processes, maritime opportunities can promote national cohesion by generating shared economic benefits and reinforcing collective security objectives (Kaplan, 2010). Strengthening national unity is therefore not only a domestic political priority but also a strategic requirement

for Somalia's effective participation in Red Sea regional politics. A cohesive Somali state is better equipped to convert geographic advantage into political influence, sustainable economic growth, and long-term regional stability.

Maritime Dispute Resolution and Its Role in Strengthening Somalia's National Unity

Somalia's engagement in the Red Sea region entails acting as a unified national authority in addressing and resolving maritime disputes related to boundaries, jurisdictional claims, and the utilization of marine resources. The effective resolution of such disputes is essential not only for protecting maritime sovereignty but also for consolidating national unity and political stability. Maritime disputes—whether involving territorial waters, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), or access to offshore natural resources—risk becoming sources of internal fragmentation if they are not managed through coordinated and inclusive national frameworks. In Somalia's federal context, fragmented approaches to maritime governance can exacerbate tensions between the federal government and member states, while simultaneously weakening Somalia's negotiating position in regional and international forums (Clapham, 2017).

Maritime Governance as a Tool for National Unity

The peaceful resolution of maritime disputes requires effective coordination between the Federal Government of Somalia and its Federal Member States. A coherent national maritime policy provides a shared strategic vision for managing marine resources and safeguarding maritime boundaries. Such coordination reduces institutional competition, promotes equitable benefit-sharing, and strengthens trust between central and regional authorities. By establishing unified legal and institutional frameworks for maritime governance, Somalia can transform its maritime domain into a source of national integration rather than political contestation. Clearly articulated policies governing fisheries, offshore hydrocarbons, port development, and maritime security align economic incentives with collective state objectives and contribute to national cohesion (OECD, 2018).

Economic Development and Conflict Prevention

The development of Somalia's blue economy—through sustainable fisheries, offshore energy exploration, maritime trade, and coastal infrastructure—offers a critical opportunity to link economic growth with peacebuilding. When marine resources are managed transparently and revenues are distributed fairly, incentives for conflict are reduced and public confidence in state institutions is strengthened (UNDP, 2020). Conversely, weak regulatory frameworks and uncoordinated governance can allow localized disputes over marine resources to escalate into

broader political conflicts, undermining national unity. Maritime dispute resolution is therefore inseparable from Somalia's broader processes of reconciliation, institutional rebuilding, and state formation.

Legal Frameworks and International Engagement

Somalia's adherence to international maritime law—particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—provides a legal foundation for peacefully resolving disputes and asserting sovereign rights over maritime zones. A unified national position enhances Somalia's credibility in arbitration proceedings, bilateral negotiations, and multilateral diplomatic engagements (Churchill & Lowe, 2014). Engagement with regional and international partners through diplomacy, legal cooperation, and technical assistance further strengthens Somalia's capacity to manage maritime disputes while reinforcing territorial integrity and rule-based governance.

Maritime Stability as a Pillar of National Cohesion

Resolving maritime disputes is not merely a technical or legal exercise; it is a political process deeply connected to Somalia's national unity. A unified approach to maritime governance reinforces state authority, reduces internal divisions, and positions Somalia as a stable and responsible actor within the Red Sea region. By harmonizing federal and regional interests, adopting transparent maritime policies, and investing in institutional capacity, Somalia can ensure that its maritime domain contributes to national cohesion, economic resilience, and long-term political stability.

Promoting Somalia's Unity through International Cooperation and Strategic Investment

Somalia's strategic relevance within the Red Sea region is contingent upon the preservation of national unity and the ability to manage external engagement in ways that reinforce sovereignty rather than fragmentation. A cohesive Somali state is a prerequisite for ensuring that international cooperation and foreign investment support national development objectives instead of exacerbating political divisions. International actors and investment institutions have shown increasing interest in Somalia's ports, fisheries sector, and offshore hydrocarbon potential. These sectors form the backbone of Somalia's emerging blue economy and offer opportunities for sustainable growth, employment generation, and public revenue. When governed within a unified national framework, such investments can strengthen state institutions and promote inclusive development across federal regions (World Bank, 2021).

Advancing Somalia's Cohesion via Global Partnerships

Effective international cooperation provides Somalia with access to technical expertise, financial resources, and institutional capacity-building necessary for managing maritime assets. However, positive outcomes depend on cooperation being conducted through legitimate national institutions representing collective interests. Fragmented engagement—where external actors bypass federal authorities and negotiate directly with sub-national entities—risks deepening political divisions and undermining sovereignty. A unified Somalia enhances its bargaining power with international partners, enabling it to negotiate transparent investment agreements and protect long-term national interests. Political fragmentation, by contrast, weakens Somalia's position and increases vulnerability to external exploitation (Duffield, 2014).

The Interplay of Investment, Sovereignty, and National Stability

Somalia's location along critical Red Sea and Gulf of Aden trade routes makes it an indispensable stakeholder in regional security and economic planning. Sustainable investment in ports, maritime infrastructure, and marine resources can serve as a stabilizing force when aligned with national development priorities and equitable resource-sharing arrangements. Foreign direct investment in maritime sectors can also contribute to peacebuilding by reducing economic grievances, improving service delivery, and reinforcing state legitimacy. This interdependence between economic development and political stability underscores the central role of national unity as the foundation for effective international cooperation and long-term state resilience.

International Engagement as a Pillar of Somali Unity

Somalia's strategic importance within the Red Sea and Horn of Africa geopolitical environment makes it essential for regional and global actors to engage with the country as a unified and sovereign state. National unity ensures that international cooperation supports long-term stability rather than short-term geopolitical interests. Coherent foreign policy formulation, centralized oversight of strategic investments, and effective coordination between federal and regional authorities are therefore critical to preventing external engagement from exacerbating internal political divisions (Williams, 2018). Somalia's unity is thus not merely a domestic political objective but a strategic prerequisite for maximizing the benefits of international cooperation and investment linked to the Red Sea maritime corridor.

The Impact of Red Sea Geopolitics on Somalia's National Unity

Somalia's Relations with Neighbouring States

The geopolitical configuration of the Red Sea significantly shapes Somalia's relations with neighbouring states, including both Red Sea littoral countries and states sharing land borders with Somalia. Located at the centre of the Horn of Africa, Somalia maintains complex historical, cultural, economic, and political relationships with Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, Yemen, Eritrea, and Sudan. These relationships exert a direct influence on Somalia's internal stability, security environment, and political cohesion (de Waal, 2015). Somalia's regional interactions encompass trade, maritime security, migration, counterterrorism, and the governance of coastal and maritime spaces. Maritime routes, access to sea lanes, and the management of fisheries and offshore hydrocarbons represent core factors shaping these relationships. Consequently, the Red Sea's strategic importance directly affects Somalia's foreign policy orientation and its domestic political dynamics.

The Interplay of Geopolitics, Maritime Disputes, and National Unity

Political rivalries and unresolved maritime and border disputes have periodically undermined cooperation in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa region. These disputes often arise as landlocked states seek access to maritime corridors through diplomatic pressure, economic leverage, or strategic manoeuvring. Ethiopia's long-standing interest in securing access to the Red Sea illustrates how regional geopolitical ambitions intersect with Somalia's internal vulnerabilities (Markakis, 2011). Tensions involving Somalia and Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea, and Ethiopia and Eritrea are frequently rooted in security concerns, port access, and control over strategic waterways. Such disputes have strained diplomatic relations and weakened regional cooperation mechanisms. For Somalia, these dynamics pose a direct challenge to national unity, as external actors may exploit political fragmentation or federal–regional tensions to advance their strategic objectives.

Regional Relations and Their Implications for Somali Unity

Somalia's national unity is closely linked to its ability to engage neighbouring states through a coherent and centralized foreign and maritime policy. When Somalia speaks with a unified voice, it is better positioned to manage cross-border challenges, safeguard maritime sovereignty, and negotiate equitable regional agreements. Political fragmentation, by contrast, weakens diplomatic credibility and increases vulnerability to external interference (Menkhaus, 2014). The geopolitics of the Red Sea therefore represent both a test and an opportunity for Somali unity. Cooperation grounded in respect for sovereignty and international law can

enhance Somalia's security and economic prospects. Conversely, unresolved disputes and competitive regional ambitions risk deepening internal divisions if not addressed through inclusive governance and coordinated diplomacy.

Strategic Implications for Somalia

Strengthening national unity is not only a domestic priority but a strategic necessity within the Red Sea geopolitical environment. A unified Somalia can transform regional interdependence into a source of stability, ensuring that relations with neighbouring states contribute positively to national cohesion, maritime security, and long-term development.

The Alleged Recognition of Israel and Its Impact on Somali National Unity

Political Recognition and Domestic Polarization

The issue of alleged recognition of Israel has emerged as a contentious political matter within Somalia, contributing to internal disputes and social polarization. Such claims have been widely perceived as contradicting Somalia's historical stance, societal values, and long-standing political commitments. Allegations that certain sub-national administrations have pursued informal engagement with Israel have therefore generated significant controversy, with implications for national unity and political stability. Somali public opinion has traditionally expressed strong support for the Palestinian cause, grounded in religious identity, anti-colonial solidarity, and adherence to international legal principles of self-determination (Pinfari, 2019). As a result, perceived normalization efforts undertaken without national consensus have intensified political divisions and complicated state-building efforts.

Background of Alleged Recognition in Northern Somalia

Historically, Somalia has not maintained diplomatic relations with Israel, aligning instead with Arab and Islamic positions on the Palestinian issue. Successive Somali governments supported international resolutions critical of Israeli policies in occupied Palestinian territories. Following the collapse of central authority in 1991, prolonged political fragmentation allowed regional actors to pursue divergent political strategies, including foreign engagement initiatives. In recent years, reports suggesting informal outreach to Israel by authorities in northern Somalia—allegedly aimed at securing international recognition—have sparked widespread opposition. Rather than enhancing legitimacy, these initiatives have deepened domestic fragmentation, intensified tensions between federal and regional authorities, and resulted in increased diplomatic isolation (Hansen, 2020).

Regional and International Reactions

Alleged recognition initiatives have been met with strong opposition from Muslim-majority states, Arab governments, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). These actors have consistently rejected unilateral normalization efforts that bypass collective regional consensus. Within Somalia, public opposition has been pronounced, with many citizens viewing such actions as violations of Islamic values, national identity, and constitutional principles. This backlash has heightened social tensions and political instability, illustrating how external alignments pursued without national legitimacy can undermine internal cohesion and affect regional stability in the Horn of Africa.

Implications for State-Building and National Unity

From a state-building perspective, the controversy highlights the risks associated with fragmented foreign policy in a federal system lacking strong central coordination. Foreign relations are a core attribute of sovereignty, and unilateral diplomatic actions by sub-national entities undermine state authority and weaken national unity (Lake & Rothchild, 2005). Strengthening Somalia's unity therefore requires inclusive national dialogue and consensus-building on sensitive foreign policy issues tied to identity, religion, and historical commitments. A transparent and unified foreign policy framework—rooted in constitutional legitimacy—is essential for reinforcing sovereignty, limiting external manipulation, and advancing reconciliation.

An Analytical Perspective on National Unity

The controversy surrounding alleged recognition of Israel demonstrates how fragmented diplomacy can erode national unity. In a geopolitically sensitive region such as the Red Sea corridor, national cohesion is indispensable for safeguarding sovereignty, protecting societal values, and ensuring that foreign policy serves collective rather than sectional interests.

The Impact of Red Sea Regional Instability on Somali Politics and National Unity

Regional Instability and Spillover Effects on Somalia

Instability in the Red Sea region—manifested through armed conflict, political rivalries, ethnic tensions, and weak governance—has exerted a direct and sustained impact on Somalia's internal political environment. Persistent crises in neighbouring and adjacent Red Sea states have complicated efforts to consolidate Somali state authority, strengthen national unity, and establish effective governance over maritime and coastal resources. As one of the world's most strategically significant maritime corridors, the Red Sea has become an arena of intense

competition among regional and global powers seeking security influence, economic access, and geopolitical leverage. This volatile environment has constrained Somalia's capacity to pursue coherent national policies, particularly in the areas of maritime governance, port development, and offshore resource management. Consequently, Somalia's long-term objectives of unity and sustainable development have been repeatedly disrupted by external pressures and regional instability (Heinrich, 2018).

External Interference and Internal Political Fragmentation

The involvement of regional and international actors in Red Sea affairs—through military cooperation, political alliances, and economic investments—has, at times, intensified internal political competition within Somalia. External support directed toward specific political elites, regional administrations, or armed groups has reinforced rivalries among Somali stakeholders, contributing to mistrust and institutional fragmentation. Such patterns of engagement have occasionally encouraged parallel governance structures and competing political processes, undermining efforts to build inclusive national institutions. In the absence of a unified national framework, Somalia remains vulnerable to proxy rivalries linked to broader Red Sea geopolitics. This dynamic not only weakens Somalia's internal cohesion but also contributes to insecurity across the wider Horn of Africa (Kaldor & Rangelov, 2014).

Implications for National Unity and State-Building

From a state-building perspective, regional instability in the Red Sea constitutes a structural constraint on Somalia's national unity. Political fragmentation—exacerbated by external interference—limits Somalia's ability to manage shared maritime resources equitably, enforce sovereignty over its territorial waters, and articulate a consistent foreign policy. These weaknesses undermine public confidence in state institutions and impede reconciliation among Somali communities. Conversely, strengthening national unity would significantly enhance Somalia's resilience to regional instability. A cohesive political system grounded in inclusive governance and constitutional legitimacy would enable Somalia to engage regional and international actors from a position of strength. Such unity reduces opportunities for external actors to exploit internal divisions and allows Somalia to contribute constructively to regional peace initiatives and maritime security arrangements (Rotberg, 2017).

Strategic Outlook

The instability of the Red Sea region underscores the interdependence between regional security dynamics and Somalia's internal political cohesion. Addressing the root causes of fragmentation within Somalia—while promoting coordinated diplomacy and regional

cooperation—remains essential for safeguarding national unity, ensuring sustainable development, and enhancing stability both domestically and across the Red Sea basin.

Analytical Link to Somali Unity

Regional conflicts and geopolitical competition in the Red Sea demonstrate how fragile national unity can amplify Somalia's vulnerability to external shocks. Strengthening unity is therefore not only a domestic priority but also a strategic necessity for insulating Somalia from destabilizing regional dynamics and enabling it to assume a stabilizing role within the Horn of Africa.

The Red Sea and the Future of Somalia's National Unity

Opportunities for Regional Cooperation

The Red Sea offers Somalia and its neighbours' significant opportunities for regional cooperation capable of advancing long-term stability and development in the Horn of Africa. Such cooperation may include joint mechanisms for maritime resource governance, environmental protection, fisheries management, trade facilitation, and coordinated security operations aimed at combating piracy, terrorism, and other transnational maritime threats. Collaborative development of ports and maritime trade corridors can further strengthen political trust and security cooperation among Red Sea states.

By engaging in inclusive dialogue and negotiated regional frameworks, Somalia can integrate its maritime policies into broader cooperative mechanisms, reinforcing a rules-based regional order. Crucially, these benefits depend on Somalia engaging externally through unified national institutions rather than fragmented authorities (Bueger, 2015).

The Role of the Red Sea in Somalia's Economic and Security Development

The Red Sea holds substantial economic potential for Somalia. Its fisheries sector supports coastal livelihoods and contributes to food security, employment, and export revenue when sustainably managed. Additionally, offshore hydrocarbons and seabed mineral resources offer the prospect of long-term economic transformation if governed through transparent and inclusive national frameworks. Realizing these opportunities, however, depends on political stability and national unity. Effective maritime resource governance requires coordinated policymaking, equitable revenue-sharing arrangements, and strong legal institutions capable of regulating exploitation and preventing conflict over resource control. Maritime security is equally critical, Somalia must enhance its capacity to protect its coastline and adjacent sea lanes

from piracy, illicit trafficking, arms smuggling, and extremist activities. Improved security at sea increases confidence among international investors and shipping companies, reinforcing Somalia's integration into global trade networks. In this sense, unity on land and security at sea are mutually reinforcing processes (Murphy, 2011).

National Unity as a Strategic Imperative

Somalia's future national unity is closely tied to how effectively it leverages its Red Sea position. A unified Somali state can transform strategic geography into a platform for regional leadership, economic integration, and cooperative security. Political fragmentation, by contrast, risks converting maritime opportunities into sources of competition, external interference, and internal division. Strengthening unity through inclusive governance, constitutional legitimacy, and coordinated federal–regional relations is therefore a prerequisite for maximizing the benefits of Red Sea cooperation. In the long term, Somalia's ability to harness the Red Sea as a driver of peace, prosperity, and stability will depend on consolidating a cohesive and resilient national state.

Analytical Synthesis: The Red Sea and Somali Unity

The Red Sea represents both an opportunity and a test for Somalia's national unity. Regional cooperation, economic development, and maritime security can only be fully realized through a unified Somali state capable of coordinating policy, managing resources equitably, and engaging partners with a single national voice. In this way, the Red Sea is not merely a geographic asset but a strategic foundation for Somalia's future unity and stability.

Measures to Strengthen Somalia's National Unity

To strengthen Somalia's national unity while effectively harnessing the strategic opportunities associated with the Red Sea, a comprehensive and coordinated set of policy measures is required. These measures are essential not only for maritime governance and economic development but also for reinforcing political cohesion and reducing structural divisions within the Somali state (Clapham, 2017).

Establishing a Clear National Agreement on Maritime Governance

The Federal Government of Somalia and its Federal Member States must reach a binding national agreement that clearly defines authority over maritime resources, jurisdictional responsibilities, and mechanisms for revenue sharing. Such an agreement would reduce institutional disputes, prevent fragmented or unilateral maritime contracts, and ensure equitable distribution of benefits derived from Somalia's maritime domain. From the perspective of

national unity, a coherent maritime governance framework reinforces state legitimacy and affirms that marine resources constitute a shared national asset rather than a source of political rivalry (Kraska, 2011).

Strengthening Coastal and Maritime Security

Enhancing coastal security through the development of a capable national navy and coast guard is critical for protecting Somalia's maritime territory. This includes strengthening surveillance systems, expanding regional security cooperation, and effectively implementing existing maritime security agreements with international partners. Improved maritime security reduces piracy, illegal fishing, arms trafficking, and extremist activity—threats that undermine economic development and political stability. A secure maritime environment contributes directly to national unity by reducing insecurity-driven fragmentation and strengthening public confidence in state institutions (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017).

Development of Maritime and Coastal Infrastructure

Modernizing ports, coastal transport corridors, and logistics infrastructure is essential for facilitating trade, attracting investment, and enhancing Somalia's integration into Red Sea and global markets. Strategically developed ports can serve as engines of national economic growth and employment generation. Equitable infrastructure development across regions has a unifying effect by reducing regional disparities and reinforcing perceptions of shared national progress, thereby strengthening social and political cohesion (World Bank, 2020).

Enhancing Public Awareness and Inclusive Participation

Public awareness of the strategic importance of Somalia's maritime domain is a critical element of sustainable governance. This can be achieved through civic education initiatives, inclusive national consultations, and structured engagement with coastal communities. Inclusive participation ensures that maritime policies reflect public interests and cultural values, reducing political tensions and fostering a shared national vision. Public engagement strengthens social cohesion and reinforces the idea that Somalia's maritime future is a collective national responsibility (Putnam, 1993).

Contribution to National Unity

Collectively, these measures can significantly strengthen Somalia's national unity by aligning maritime governance, security, economic development, and public participation within a unified national framework. Through coordinated implementation, the Red Sea can be

transformed from a potential source of division into a foundation for cohesion, stability, and long-term development.

Analytical Link to Somali Unity

Effective maritime governance is inseparable from national unity. Clear national agreements, secure coastlines, inclusive development strategies, and participatory governance ensure that Red Sea opportunities reinforce state cohesion rather than deepen fragmentation. In this context, the Red Sea emerges not only as a strategic maritime space but also as a cornerstone of rebuilding a resilient and unified Somali state.

The Impact of Global Politics and the Positions of Major Powers

The Red Sea has become one of the most contested regions in contemporary global geopolitics, with direct implications for Somalia's domestic politics and national unity. Major global powers—including the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the European Union—maintain sustained interests in the region driven by security considerations, trade routes, military positioning, and energy supply chains (Kaplan, 2014).

Great Power Competition and Its Implications for Somalia

The competing agendas of major powers in the Red Sea region pose potential risks to Somalia's sovereignty and internal cohesion. Military agreements, foreign bases, security assistance, and infrastructure investments can exert significant influence over domestic political processes. When such engagement lacks national coordination, it may deepen internal divisions and weaken the authority of central institutions. From the perspective of national unity, uncoordinated engagement with rival global powers risks creating parallel political alignments within Somalia's federal system, undermining the coherence of national foreign and security policy (Ikenberry, 2018).

Absence of a Coherent Strategic Framework

A key challenge confronting Somalia is the lack of a comprehensive national strategy for managing relations with competing global powers active in the Red Sea. Without a unified framework regulating foreign partnerships and security cooperation, Somalia risks becoming an arena of geopolitical competition rather than a sovereign beneficiary of international engagement. Over time, this strategic ambiguity may erode governance capacity, increase political tensions, and undermine national unity (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Managing External Influence to Protect National Unity

Effectively managing the influence of major powers is therefore essential for Somalia's long-term stability. A transparent and balanced foreign policy—grounded in constitutional principles, national consensus, and institutional coordination—can enable Somalia to benefit from Red Sea geopolitics while safeguarding sovereignty. By clearly regulating foreign military presence, investment, and political engagement, Somalia can prevent external interference from exacerbating internal divisions and ensure that international partnerships advance collective national interests (Acharya, 2014).

An Analytical Perspective on National Unity

Somalia's national unity is closely linked to its capacity to navigate global power competition in the Red Sea. A unified diplomatic posture, coordinated federal–regional engagement, and a shared strategic vision can transform great-power rivalry from a vulnerability into an opportunity for development, security, and state consolidation.

Synthesis and Analytical Conclusions

The Red Sea is not merely a maritime corridor but a geopolitical arena where global rivalries intersect with Somalia's internal political dynamics. Somalia's ability to manage these external pressures through a unified, strategic, and nationally grounded foreign policy is critical to preserving sovereignty and strengthening national unity. When properly governed, engagement with global powers can support Somalia's stability rather than undermine it.

Conclusion

The political geography of the Red Sea plays a decisive role in shaping the political, economic, and security environment of the Horn of Africa, particularly Somalia. As a strategic maritime corridor endowed with vital natural resources, the Red Sea holds profound significance for Somalia and its neighbours. Relations between Somalia and Red Sea states have frequently been marked by political tensions, maritime disputes, and competition over resources, all of which have challenged Somalia's national unity. These conflicts have exacerbated fragmentation and hindered the consolidation of a cohesive Somali state.

Nevertheless, the opportunities presented by the Red Sea—particularly in fisheries, maritime trade, and offshore resources—remain substantial. When managed sustainably and equitably, these sectors can serve as foundations for peacebuilding, economic integration, and long-term development. Strengthening Somalia's unity requires shared responsibility for maritime governance, clearly negotiated federal–regional agreements, enhanced regional cooperation,

and carefully managed engagement with global powers. If leveraged strategically, the political geography of the Red Sea can become a catalyst for national cohesion and regional stability rather than a source of division.

Recommendations and Future Perspectives

Strengthening Somalia's national unity and enhancing its strategic role in the Red Sea region require a forward-looking policy framework that integrates maritime governance, security, economic development, and diplomatic engagement. The following recommendations outline key strategic priorities necessary for achieving long-term stability and cohesion.

1. Establishing a National Maritime Governance Framework

Somalia should adopt a comprehensive national maritime agreement that clearly defines maritime boundaries, jurisdictional authority, and sovereign rights in accordance with international maritime law. Clarifying legal authority over territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) is essential for protecting national resources and preventing disputes that could undermine political unity. A unified maritime policy would also strengthen Somalia's credibility in regional and international negotiations (Churchill & Lowe, 1999).

2. Strengthening Coastal and Maritime Security

Developing a fully operational Somali Coast Guard and naval force is critical for safeguarding maritime sovereignty. This requires sustained investment in training, equipment, and surveillance capabilities, as well as structured security cooperation with regional states and international partners. Enhanced maritime security reduces threats such as piracy, illegal fishing, and trafficking, while increasing confidence among international shipping and investment actors. Secure maritime environments contribute directly to political stability and national cohesion (Bueger, 2015).

3. Developing Economic and Coastal Infrastructure

Strategic investment in ports, coastal transport corridors, and logistics infrastructure is essential for stimulating local economies and integrating Somalia into Red Sea and global trade networks. Well-governed ports can generate employment, increase public revenues, and reduce regional inequalities. Equitable infrastructure development across federal

regions reinforces national solidarity by ensuring that economic benefits are shared rather than concentrated (World Bank, 2021).

4. Promoting Regional and International Cooperation

Somalia must strengthen diplomatic engagement and security partnerships with Red Sea and Horn of Africa states to address shared challenges, including maritime security, environmental protection, and trade facilitation. Collective regional frameworks enhance trust, reduce conflict risks, and promote coordinated responses to transnational threats. Somalia's effectiveness in such cooperation depends on presenting a unified national position grounded in sovereign decision-making (African Union, 2019).

5. Raising National Awareness and Civic Engagement

Public awareness of the strategic importance of maritime resources is a critical element of sustainable governance. The Somali government should promote civic education initiatives and inclusive consultations to foster public understanding of how the Red Sea contributes to national unity and economic development. Engaging coastal communities and civil society strengthens social cohesion and reinforces shared responsibility for safeguarding national assets (Putnam, 2000).

6. Resisting External Interference

To protect sovereignty and national unity, Somalia requires a clear and consistent policy framework to resist foreign interference that exploits internal divisions. Both government and opposition actors must commit to preserving constitutional authority and preventing external actors from influencing domestic political outcomes. Transparent foreign engagement policies help ensure that international partnerships support national interests rather than fragment political authority (Clapham, 2017).

Transforming Geopolitical Opportunities into Unity: Somalia, the Red Sea, and the Stability of the Horn of Africa

The future of Somalia's national unity and the stability of the Horn of Africa are closely linked to how effectively political and geographic cooperation in the Red Sea region is managed. When Somalia and its neighbours engage through mutual respect, shared security frameworks, and coordinated economic strategies, the Red Sea can serve as a catalyst for unity, peace, and development. Conversely, failure to manage maritime governance and external engagement coherently risks perpetuating fragmentation and instability. Ultimately, transforming the Red

Sea into a strategic asset for Somalia depends on inclusive governance, institutional coherence, and sustained regional cooperation. Under these conditions, Somalia can convert its maritime geography into a foundation for long-term national cohesion and regional stability.

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