

The Rights, Interests, and Strategic Approaches of Landlocked States in the Maritime Domain: The Case of Ethiopia

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Abstract

Literature pertaining to maritime security often focuses on the interests and concerns of coastal states, while those of landlocked states are either overlooked or treated as secondary. When scholars do consider the interests of landlocked states, the studies tend to explore their role primarily in the context of trade and conflict or disputes over sea access, while limited attention is paid to their broader maritime interests or the strategies employed to safeguard these interests. This article seeks to address this gap by providing a more comprehensive analysis of the rights and interests of landlocked states in maritime contexts and looks to Africa to draw examples. It begins with an exploration of the rights afforded to landlocked states under international law, particularly via the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The article then examines the various maritime interests of these states and posits several strategies that landlocked states employ to assert their rights and protect their interests. Finally, it utilises Ethiopia as an illustrative case to demonstrate how these strategies are put into practice.

Key words: landlocked states; maritime domain; maritime interests; UNCLOS; Africa; Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Landlocked states (LLS) are defined under Article 124 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS] 1982) as “a state which has no sea-coast”. The African Union’s Integrated Maritime Strategy (African Union [AU] 2012) does not use the language of lack but rather refers to “landly connected... states”. LLS are often absent in maritime literature, despite there being some 44 LLS, equivalent to one-fifth of all the countries of the world (Anand 2021). Likewise, there are often calls from the ocean politics and maritime security epistemic communities indicating a need for more work to position LLS, vis-a-vis the maritime domain. Indeed, as Nezingu (2023: 3) points out, while LLS are often “physically distant from the maritime domain in reality, they are also theoretically isolated from maritime discourse as most maritime literature is concerned solely with littoral states”. Where the literature does deal with LLS, it does so primarily relevant to two main themes: one, legal debates around LLS’ rights in the maritime domain and issues in the enforcement of those rights (Childs 1972; Bowen 1986; Tuerk 2007), including the logistics surrounding sea access via trade corridors, for example; and two, how not having direct access to the sea presents as a development challenge (Snow *et al.* 2003; Faye *et al.* 2004), compounded by the limited power these states have in relation to the coastal states on which they depend for the import and export of goods (Caflich 1978; Mishra and Singh 2008). Mishra and Singh (2008: 55) elaborate that LLS face “permanent inferiority” because of their lack of direct access to the sea, which poses challenges to their development trajectories.

Both themes ultimately speak to a single issue: trade. This is undoubtedly an important concern of any state, and while their landlocked status necessarily places LLS in a unique position regarding how they manage their political economy, they must nonetheless continue to have interests in the maritime domain, as all states do, that go beyond trade routes and access to them. Moreover, as their geographic nature is unchangeable outside of the acquisition of new territory, LLS must navigate these circumstances, which undoubtedly shape their national interest, domestic- and foreign policy, and the way in which they engage in the global system especially in reference to the sea. How, then, do these states manage their legal rights? What are their maritime interests? And what strategies do they implement to safeguard these interests? This article explores these questions and does so by first reviewing the legal rights afforded to LLS under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and other international legal instruments, then evaluating the interests of LLS in the maritime domain, and finally, proffering several strategies employed by LLS to navigate their landlocked status and protect their maritime interests. It provides examples from Africa to illustrate the maritime interests of LLS and how they protect them, utilising Ethiopia as a case.

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2. Theoretical Framing

LLS have traditionally occupied a peripheral position in International Relations and Maritime Security Studies, often treated as geopolitical anomalies within a world order, which, from a realist perspective, is shaped by maritime access. Existing scholarship and international legal frameworks focus predominantly on how LLS can overcome their spatial limitations for the sake of trade and development, raising questions around how re-examining the position of LLS within the maritime domain necessarily requires reconsideration of the structural, spatial and normative dimensions of their engagement within it.

Using critical geopolitics as a lens allows the interrogation of how space is constructed in International Relations, notably how geography holds power, as has been clarified by scholars like Mahan (1890). Ó Tuathail (1996) argues that space is not a neutral container, but is actively produced and ordered by geopolitical discourses, with spatial ordering being a key mechanism of power. From this perspective, LLS are not merely victims of unfortunate geography, but are located within systems of spatial ordering that privilege certain types of access and mobility over others. Critiquing Agnew's (1994) assumption that the world is naturally divided into sovereign, bounded, fixed units in the form of states, it can be deduced from Ó Tuathail's (1996) reasoning that maritime space is not just a physical domain, but a politically constructed and controlled space where power is projected, exercised and denied.

Indeed, LLS are often excluded from this spatial imaginary because of dominant discourses that frame maritime power as inherently coastal. Their maritime interests are routinely subordinated to those of coastal or island states, whose territorial and legal claims are more straightforwardly connected to the sea. This has implications for how LLS are imagined and positioned in international fora, particularly those governing maritime issues, trade and environmental regulation. Critical geopolitics invites us to interrogate how the language of 'access' and 'dependency' used in relation to LLS is not value-neutral but reinforces a hierarchised geography of power.

International legal regimes increasingly treat vast areas of the ocean as part of the global commons² (Abhold et al. 2019). Within the existing legal architecture, detailed below, LLS are nominally granted equal rights to participate in the governance and benefit-sharing of these commons. However, the extent to which this formal inclusion translates into meaningful participation is contestable.

Theoretical discussions around the governance of the global commons are a useful consideration here, since they tend to draw attention to the tensions between universal access to the sea and differentiated capacity within it (Bosselmann 2015; DeSombre 2009). LLS often lack the naval capacity, scientific infrastructure or diplomatic leverage to participate on an equal footing with maritime powers in exploiting or protecting common oceanic resources. As a result, their access to marine genetic resources, ability to conduct marine scientific research, or involvement in area-based management tools such as marine protected areas can be severely limited, despite the legal provisions that entitle them to such participation (Casal and Selamé 2015).

This gap between legal entitlements and practical capacity raises important questions about equity in the governance of the global commons (International Seabed Authority 2021). LLS, particularly from the Global South, have often lobbied for redistributive mechanisms and technology transfers as a condition for participating in high seas governance. Their presence in negotiations on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction³ illustrates how they have attempted to reframe the narrative from one of exclusion to inclusion, arguing that shared ocean resources require shared governance regardless of geographical location (High Seas Alliance 2024).

Structural power theory emphasises how systems of rules, norms and institutions can produce and reproduce asymmetric relationships between states (Pustovitovskij and Klemmer 2011). Applying this lens to LLS reveals how their maritime vulnerabilities are not just geographic, but are embedded in broader systems of economic and political dependency. LLS typically depend on one or more transit state(s) for access to the sea, leaving them vulnerable to shifts in the domestic politics, foreign policy or infrastructural conditions of those states. This dependency often translates into significant economic costs, diplomatic concessions or vulnerability to coercive bargaining (Casal and Selamé 2015). Even when formal agreements exist to secure transit rights, the structural imbalance between LLS and their coastal neighbours can tilt outcomes in favour of the latter.

2 The global commons are understood as "areas and natural resources that are not subject to the national jurisdiction of a particular state but are shared by other states, if not the international community as a whole" (Schrijver 2016: 1252-1253).

3 It is useful here to briefly reference the maritime zones delimited under UNCLOS. These include: a territorial sea extending 12 nautical miles from the country's baseline in which it has full jurisdiction; a contiguous zone up to 24 nautical miles from the baseline, allowing the country to enforce certain laws; an exclusive economic zone extending up to 200 nautical miles in which the state has sovereign rights for the exploration and exploitation of marine resources; and the high seas, in which no single state has sovereignty, but to which is open to all states (UNCLOS 1982), forming part of the global commons.

Moreover, structural power shapes the international maritime order itself, where norms around port access, maritime security and environmental compliance are often set by powerful coastal states (Schandorf 2024). LLS must operate within this norm-setting environment, leveraging their structural power to their advantage. Their engagement in international fora pertaining to the sea is thus, not only a matter of legal entitlement, but also of negotiating space within a hierarchy of influence.

Together, these theoretical approaches help move the analysis of LLS beyond a technical or legalistic framing toward one that situates the states within broader systems of power and governance, and this thinking underpins the discussion that follows.

3. Rights of Landlocked States under International Law

UNCLOS, being the main framework for the governance of the world's maritime domain, speaks directly to the rights of LLS.⁴ These primarily fall into two categories. The first is access rights. Under Article 125 (UNCLOS 1982), landlocked states enjoy the freedom of transit, however, the terms of this must be agreed with the transit states via bilateral, sub-regional or regional agreements and ultimately, transit states may exercise sovereignty over their territory and protect their rights within it, which may in turn be detrimental to LLS. Anand (2021: 264) notes that the provision requiring LLS and coastal states to enter into transit agreements can “in some circumstances, disadvantage the landlocked states, especially if the transit state wished to maximise its interests through the agreement thereby rendering the landlocked country more dependent on the transit state”.

Further, under Article 131, a LLS is entitled to enjoy equal treatment in the use of maritime ports of transit states, with the Article specifying that ships flying the flags of landlocked states should not face discrimination when accessing foreign ports, ensuring parity in port fees, services, and facilities (UNCLOS 1982). Indeed, LLS are permitted under Article 90 to operate vessels under their national flag even if they have no coastline, and these vessels are granted the right to sail the high seas flying the flag of the LLS (UNCLOS 1982). Several LLS do operate shipping registries, including Eswatini, Bolivia, Mongolia and San Marino. These have, however, raised some concerns around so-called Flags of Convenience—when vessel owners register under a certain flag due to more lenient taxation and regulation—given that an LLS would have limited capacity to inspect vessels and monitor their standards. Many open registries, where vessel owners are able register their ships under a country's flag without having a genuine link to it, are in fact located in an LLS (Griffiths and Jenks 2012).

The second category of rights pertains to the various maritime zones, with LLS having the right of innocent passage through a state's territorial sea, the freedom of navigation and overflight, including the laying of submarine cables or pipes, and other such lawful use in the exclusive economic zone, and the same rights afforded to all states on the high seas. Article 63 (UNCLOS 1982) allows an LLS to exploit living resources in the exclusive economic zones of coastal states subject to several provisions, including that this is conducted on an equitable basis bearing the economic realities of the coastal state in question in mind. Further, the LLS must also ensure the duties of coastal states pertaining to the conservation of those resources are performed (Swanepoel 2020). Moreover, under UNCLOS Part XI (1982), an LLS is entitled to benefit from the exploration and exploitation of resources in the seabed, which is designated as the common heritage of mankind. UNCLOS also encourages the participation of an LLS in the sea beyond the limits of national jurisdiction, bearing their particular vulnerabilities in mind. The Agreement on Marine Biodiversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (referred to as the BBNJ Agreement or High Seas Treaty) also extends rights in this regard, specifically around the benefit from marine resources and participation in ocean activities (UN 2024).

Furthermore, many regional policies also underscore existing international law and recognise the needs of LLS pertaining to the sea. For example, the African Union's Revised African Maritime Transport Charter (AU 2014) highlights the rights of African LLS to free transit.

Finally, an LLS has the right to participate in global and regional frameworks governing maritime law and policy, such as the International Maritime Organization (2024) and the International Seabed Authority (2021). Via their participation in these fora, these organisations can influence decisions on issues such as marine environmental protection, trade routes and the sustainable use of marine resources, thereby protecting the rights ascribed to them under law.

⁴ There are number of other legal instruments that have catered for LLS, notably prior to UNCLOS coming into force. These include: the 1921 Convention and Statute on Freedom of Transit; the 1958 Convention on the High Seas; and the 1965 Convention on Transit Trade of Landlocked States (Glassner 1973; Grosdidier de Matons 2014). Post 1982, there is also the Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which enables an LLS to utilise international rivers or waterways that flow through transit states to access the sea (McCaffrey 2008).

The quagmire faced by LLS, however, is often this: while they are entitled to freely access the sea, no coastal state is necessarily obliged to enter into any agreement to permit that access, and access is as such entirely contingent upon the coastal state. Moreover, access is also often costly, and issues around speed and efficiency, the quality of infrastructure, and governance of the logistics network are ultimately outside of the control of the LLS (Casal and Selamé 2015), marking a defining characteristic of ‘landlockedness’.

4. Maritime Interests of Landlocked States

LLS have multiple maritime interests, beyond the obvious access to trade. This section outlines these.

4.1. *International trade*

As much of the literature already indicates, a key interest of LLS in the maritime domain is their access to sea lines of communication⁵ (SLOCs) for the purpose of international trade. LLS are entirely reliant upon neighbouring coastal states for access to sea ports from whence exports can depart and imports can be received.

The provision of this access has, at times, caused tension and even conflict between states because access to the sea is crucial for the financial well-being of states. There are indeed a few examples of cases where access has been restricted or denied. In 2015 India imposed an informal blockade on Nepal due to diplomatic dispute over the perceived marginalisation of Madhesi groups, limiting Nepal’s access to fuel, medicines and other trade flows, disrupting Nepal’s economy (Aryal 2019). Further, Ethiopia’s access to the sea was closed off by Eritrea when the countries went to war in 1998. Ethiopia had to reroute most of its trade via Djibouti, a decision that shaped its trade dynamics ever since (De Waal 2023).

Faye *et al.* (2004: 52) explain the impact of landlocked status for trade:

For the most part, these countries have lower... external trade compared with their maritime neighbours. In explaining the reasons for these lower outcomes on average, we stressed the nature of dependence on transit neighbours for trade and how this dependence can fall under four categories: dependence on infrastructure, dependence on sound political relations, dependence on neighbours’ peace and stability, and dependence on administrative practices.

4.2. *Supply chain disruptions*

Relevant to access to SLOCs and trade, LLS are particularly vulnerable to supply chain disruptions due to their reliance on transit states, which amplifies the impact of any external disruptions and limits their ability to mitigate risks effectively. This can manifest due to a variety of different challenges. For example, geopolitical tensions and conflicts in regions surrounding critical SLOCs or ports can have far-reaching consequences for all states, but especially LLS via the introduction of blockades or sanctions which may see trade access restricted or the diversion of shipping. This has been demonstrated recently with Houthi activity in the Red Sea seeing shipping traffic divert along the Cape of Good Hope, resulting in longer, costlier journeys, especially for LLS whose goods must first travel by land before beginning their journeys by sea (Karamperidis 2024). LLS, thus, depend on the political stability of transit states as conflict in or near these states can directly impact the flow of goods and services.

In turn, LLS rely on the ability of transit states to effectively manage their maritime security responsibilities (Khanal 2017). This includes, but is not limited to, adequate maritime domain awareness, an ability to respond to threats in its maritime domain, and sound port management practices in keeping with the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code. When LLS must rely on a third party, such as private security firms, to protect their incoming or outgoing cargo, this adds a significant cost that ultimately bears an economic impact in the form of reduced returns (UNCTAD 2013).

Supply chain disruptions can also deter foreign investment given the barriers this imposes on opportunities for economic growth and development, which can lead investors to deem the LLS a high-risk environment for their investment. This perception can be further exacerbated if the disruptions become chronic or are linked to long-standing geopolitical instability (Arvis *et al.* 2007).

⁵ Sea lines of communication are “are major maritime routes between ports around the world and are used for trade, military/naval, logistics and other purposes” (Ahmed 2024)

4.3. *Food and health security*

In addition, where countries may rely on imports for key food stuffs, any disruptions to imports travelling by sea may negatively impact their food security. Many LLS rely on imported food supplies, and delays or interruptions in shipments can lead to shortages and inflation, with devastating effects on vulnerable populations. For example, Demont (2013: 179) note that Burkina Faso, which is landlocked, “imports 60% of its rice consumption needs from Pakistan, India, Thailand and Vietnam via the ports of Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo”. While not the dominant staple food, rice consumption has increased in recent years making it a central element of the population’s diet (Milling Middle East and Africa Magazine 2023).

Food security may also be impacted by the ability to import fertiliser and other agricultural goods. Any disruptions in maritime supply chains delay shipments, thereby reducing the availability of key commodities, driving up prices, or even threatening the viability of domestic crops, in turn worsening the state’s food security. Delays at ports or during overland transit can also lead to the spoilage of perishable goods, potentially exacerbating food shortages or resulting in financial losses (Masoura 2024).

Further, as is indicated by the earlier example of Nepal, a country’s health security may be negatively impacted by reduced access to medicines that may be a result from a disrupted or restricted access to the sea or supply chain disruptions.

4.4. *Environmental interests*

Next, LLS also have environmental interests at sea in that they are likely to experience the transboundary impacts of environmental changes on their territories. Of course, as is an issue of increasing importance on the global stage, climate change is a key contemporary challenge, and the sea is a theatre in which this will play out in large part.

Often the management of freshwater systems that connect LLS to the maritime domain—and as a result the practices that harm the maritime environment—can have severe consequences for water quality and ecosystems upstream and vice versa. There are several examples where invasive species have been introduced into lake systems via the ballast water of vessels that have travelled to inland waters (Robinson 2015). While this is not an immediate concern for African LLS given many rivers in the hinterland are not navigable (African Development Bank 2010), it nonetheless demonstrates the link between the sea and the interests of LLS.

Saltwater intrusion can be another environmental concern for LLS. The encroachment of seawater into fresh groundwater, be it due to over-pumping of fresh water resources or sea-level rise, poses multiples challenges, including: a reduction of drinking water, causing corrosion to essential infrastructure, ecosystem degradation, reduced agricultural activity, and changes in crop type (Moore and Joye 2021; US Department of Agriculture n.d.). This will only affect LLS that are geographically near to the coast (Future Water 2025), but has the potential to become more problematic as sea-levels rise.

Further, many LLS actively support international frameworks and agreements aimed at reducing marine pollution and promoting sustainable maritime practices (Maurer 2012) due to a recognition of the adverse impacts of pollution to water systems more generally.

4.5. *Global governance*

Finally, landlocked states often advocate for equitable participation in the global governance of maritime resources (Sebuliba 2024). Indeed, the negotiations for the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction agreement, saw strong LLS engagement. Kanu (2023) notes the African Group played a particularly important role “applying unorthodox pressure to bring the negotiations to a close”, adding that:

The insistence of the African Group to have the principle of the Common Heritage of [Hu]mankind... reflected in the BBNJ Treaty without derogation, and the compromised reference to the ‘freedom of marine scientific research, together with other freedoms of the high seas’ will significantly impact the implementation of the treaty and international law development on the law of the sea.

As Sebuliba (2024: 7) notes, LLS “hold a unique position due to their developmental needs, understanding of other developing nations’ needs, and limited capacity to access economic benefits in these areas... [which] allows them to present balanced views on ocean development, while exercising caution regarding environmental impacts” in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The High Seas Treaty thus allows LLS to benefit from the sustainable exploitation of marine genetic resources, contribute to decisions that impact the maritime domain via area-based management tools, such as marine protected areas and be involved in capacity building and transfer of marine

technology (De Santo *et al.* 2020). LLS' involvement underscores the shared responsibility of all nations—coastal and landlocked alike—in preserving the health of the planet's oceans, especially given their status as a global common.

5. Strategic Approaches

Karki and Shumsher Thapa (2023: 79) argue that LLS can struggle to separate politics and economics in the context of their need to access sea-based trade routes, suggesting that these states orient their foreign policies in specific ways to account for this. They will either: align themselves to maritime neighbours, offering concessions to them; advance “multi-directional” policies to spread their partnership base; or secure transport “as a priority concern in the broader scheme”. Further to this, if LLS, particularly developing countries, “abandon their neutral foreign policies, then there are chances they may face the most uncomfortable interferences from their strong neighbours” (Mishra and Singh 2008: 56).

As such, LLS must employ a variety of strategies to protect and advance their maritime interests. This article identifies four keyways in which this takes place, with several of these strategies showing an inter-relationship.

5.1. *Infrastructure development*

Infrastructure development is one strategy used by LLS to mitigate the disadvantages of their geography to ensure reliable access to global markets, while reducing their dependency on transit states and strengthening their economic resilience. This may entail investing railways, roads, pipelines and ports to ensure access, while also securing favourable economic terms (Morgan *et al.* 2019). They may also develop dry ports⁶ and logistics hubs to facilitate trade and reduce congestion at coastal ports. These efforts may be encapsulated in broader trade corridor initiatives, which will be discussed further below.

For example, Zambia has plans to establish a dry port at Kapiri Mposhi which is intended to act as a logistics and industrial hub, enabling the country to better integrate more effectively into global supply chains, while also improving regional market access (Transport & Logistics Zambia 2021).

Their investments may also include energy infrastructure such as oil pipelines, to reduce dependence on expensive and/or insecure transport routes. For example, Uganda has invested in oil pipeline projects to link it to coastal export terminals, such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline to Tanzania (Petroleum Authority of Uganda n.d.). This type of initiative not only ensures stable energy supplies, but facilitates resource exports, thus, strengthening its economic sovereignty.

Having said this, it must be said that infrastructure investment may not necessarily improve the bargaining power of LLS. Because bargaining power is contingent on a broader set of factors, if, despite the infrastructure investment, a state remains dependent on a single transit state, they are likely to remain subordinate to that state in terms of their power relations. Infrastructure investment should thus, focus on multiple corridors, if possible, while states should employ this alongside other strategies.

5.2. *Trade corridors and regional integration*

Indeed, trade corridors and regional integration can enable improved access to the sea by providing formal conduits to seaports, effectively reducing transit times and transportation costs, thereby improving the economic competitiveness of LLS (African Development Bank 2019). These corridors also help LLS to diversify their maritime access, reducing dependence on a single port or transit country.

At a regional level, there are many examples of agreements to facilitate trade corridors for LLS, for example, alternative routes are provided for Botswana and Zimbabwe to access the port at Walvis Bay via the Trans-Kalahari, Trans-Caprivi, Trans-Cunene and Trans-Oranje Corridors (South African Institute of International Affairs 2012), while the Central Corridor Transit Transport Facilitation Agency (2023) enables Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and the DRC to access the port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

Beyond physical infrastructure, regional integration through economic blocs like the African Continental Free Trade Area and the East African Community can promote trade facilitation, while also harmonising customs procedures, and improving cross-border cooperation (African Development Bank 2019). By participating in regional trade agreements, LLS gain negotiating power, improving their relative power vis-a-vis transit states, and can thus, work to ensure fair transit policies and equitable treatment in terms of port access.

⁶ Dry ports act as inland extensions of seaports, enabling efficient customs clearance, warehousing and cargo handling closer to manufacturing and trade centres (Rodrigue and Notteboom 2022)

It is worth noting that not all states that do not have a coastline or direct access to one are necessarily ‘locked out’. Some states consider themselves land-linked, and scholars like Casal and Selamé (2015) explain that landlocked countries in the European Union, for example, are well connected to the sea by virtue of a high degree of regional integration. This aids such countries in offsetting some of the developmental challenges that might otherwise be associated with their landlocked status.

5.3. *Participation in international frameworks*

LLS often also actively participate in international frameworks pertaining to the sea, being signatories of treaties and conventions such as UNCLOS and maintaining memberships of organisations like the International Maritime Organization. LLS’ involvement in these frameworks enables them to advocate for equitable access to maritime resources, improve transit agreements, and influence regulations that affect issues such as global trade and maritime security (Abhold *et al.* 2019; Psaraftis and Kontovas 2020;).

In addition, LLS’ interests are also represented by the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States. This body advocates for policies that reduce the trade disadvantages faced by LLS by encouraging investment in transit infrastructure, as well as streamlined customs procedures and fairer trade agreements, among other things (United Nations n.d. (a)). Through this platform, LLS have successfully influenced global trade policies, keeping maritime issues of interest to them on the international agenda (United Nations, n.d. (a)).

Another key area of participation is the protection of LLS’ interests in marine genetic resources and the sustainable use of oceanic biodiversity, as detailed earlier herein with reference to the BBNJ Agreement.

5.4. *Global governance*

Lastly, LLS also often cooperate in measures to address transnational maritime crime, with their participation being motivated by economic, security and environmental concerns, as illegal activities may impact on them by, for example, disrupting seaborne trade flows. One of the primary ways this cooperation takes place is via regional communities, many of which have maritime components (Gulf of Guinea Maritime Institute 2020). The Economic Community of West African States is one such case; its maritime strategy takes an integrated approach, ensuring LLS can contribute to and benefit from the bloc’s collective maritime security endeavours (ECOWAS Commission n.d.).

Further to this, LLS may also participate in international maritime security initiatives such as Interpol’s Maritime Security Programme, which includes LLS in intelligence-sharing on transnational crimes such as fisheries crime (Interpol 2021) and drug trafficking. They may also be involved in United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime programmes.

Moreover, LLS can play a role in combating financial crimes associated with maritime crime networks. Money laundering and illicit financial flows from maritime crimes may pass through financial systems in landlocked countries and as such, strengthen financial regulations and cooperation with coastal states help to disrupt these networks (Otto 2011).

6. **The Case of Ethiopia**

Ethiopia offers an interesting case of an LLS in Africa that works to assert its maritime interests. Having historically had a coastline with ports at Assab and Massawa, Ethiopia maintained a modest navy during the imperial and Derg eras, which had been established in 1955 (Abbink, 1998; Holbert 2022). Ethiopia became landlocked when Eritrea gained independence in 1993, and it subsequently disbanded its navy (Abbink 1998). Following Eritrea cutting off access to the sea during the 1998 conflict between the two countries (De Waal 2023), Ethiopia implemented strategies to address this adjustment in its circumstances. Ethiopia invested most of its energy in this regard in participating in trade corridors and investing the development of infrastructure thereof.

Ethiopia relies on Djibouti for around 95 per cent of its maritime trade (Demissie 2021), which explains its involvement in the Djibouti Corridor, intended to expand and protect its transport links to this coastal state. Addis Ababa has invested significantly in several of the components of the Corridor to enhance trade efficiency and reduce logistical bottlenecks.

- It has co-financed the *Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway*, which stretches between Ethiopia’s capital and Djibouti’s port at Doraleh (Choruma 2020). The railway became operational in 2018 and has dramatically reduced transit times—goods can now travel this distance in 12 hours, whereas this journey time was previously three days (Ho 2019). Furthermore, the railway is managed

by an Ethiopian state-owned firm, Ethiopian Shipping and Logistics Services Enterprise (Xinhua 2024).

- It has established the *Modjo Dry Port*, located around 70km from Addis Ababa, to serve as an inland logistics hub for cargo incoming from Djibouti. The dry port offers warehousing and multimodal transport operations, while also dealing with customs clearances to reduce congestion at port (Bekele 2019). Ethiopia also has additional dry ports to serve this Corridor, including Dire Dawa and Semera (Thomas 2022).
- Ethiopia has also invested in upgrading the *road networks* that connect it to Djibouti, including the Ethio-Djibouti Highway (Takele and Tolcha 2020). This provides an alternative transport route in case of railway disruptions.

Beyond this, Ethiopia has worked to foster strong diplomatic and economic ties with Djibouti, evidenced by long-term port access agreements and energy- and water cooperation deals under which Ethiopia supplies hydroelectric power to Djibouti (Stockholm International Water Institute 2022; Mutambo 2024).

Moreover, because Ethiopia is so heavily reliant on Djibouti for its trade, it is also working towards securing the corridor of security threats. To this end, Ethiopia has supported regional anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, notably via the Djibouti Code of Conduct (defenceWeb 2024) and collaborates with Djibouti on modernising customs and logistics systems to improve trade flow and prevent illegal trafficking (Tsegaye 2024).

To diversify its maritime access and reduce its dependency on Djibouti, Ethiopia has also partnered with Somaliland to secure use of the Berbera Port (Bakonyi 2024). The Berbera Corridor connects Addis Ababa to Berbera and is expected to become a major regional trade and logistics hub; projections suggest trade via this route will increase six-fold by 2050 (Cities Alliance 2024). Significant infrastructure investments have been made along the Corridor, including: expansion of the port, with a US\$442 million deal being struck with DP World to develop and operate the port (Port Technology 2017); and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development and the UK's Department of International Development funding the upgrade of the road that connects Berbera with Wajaale on the Ethiopian border (APO Group 2021).

As a means of supporting this economic relationship, Ethiopia signed a pact with Somaliland in 2024, in which it signalled readiness to recognise its independence from Somalia in exchange for access to Somaliland's coastline for commercial and naval use (Reuters 2024).

Ethiopia has also joined the LAPSET Corridor Project, which is intended to connect Kenya, Ethiopia and South Sudan—this will provide Ethiopia access to the Lamu Port in Kenya (Rift Valley Institute 2013). Access to Lamu serves to diversify its maritime trade routes and reduce dependence on Djibouti, while also stimulating economic activities by opening new markets and attracting investment. Under the Project, Ethiopia and Kenya have agreed to build the Standard Gauge Railway to link Addis Ababa to Nairobi, with construction expected to begin in 2025. The Project envisions a road network between Lamu and Isiolo in Kenya, and Moyale at the Ethiopian border (Preston 2023). An oil pipeline is also included, aiming to cover a similar route between Lamu to Addis Ababa via Isiolo and Moyale (Mutambo 2018).

Coming to Ethiopia's participation in international frameworks, it is a member of the International Maritime Organisation and has actively engaged with the body to provide training to improve officials' understanding of maritime security, particularly regarding flag state control and compliance (International Maritime Organization 2024). Ethiopia has also been a signatory of several international agreements pertaining to the sea, including the 2006 Maritime Labour Convention, which is a key component of the maritime sector's regulatory framework (International Labour Organization, 2019). Further, the country plays an active role in regional security initiatives, including counter-piracy as already mentioned, as well as its contribution to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM 2014).

Another dimension to Ethiopia's seaward approach is its desire to re-establish its navy. The drive to rebuild Ethiopia's navy gained momentum under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, having initiated sweeping military reforms that explicitly included naval reconstitution as a goal (Berekebteab 2024). Arrangements are now in place for Ethiopia's naval forces to be based in Djibouti (Holbert 2022). This appears to be motivated by two central factors: Ethiopia's ambition for regional hegemony, which is central to its identity and national pride; and the ability to secure its strategic and security interests by, in part, protecting its maritime interests.

7. Conclusion

Foregrounding LLS' trade concerns, vis-a-vis their position in maritime affairs, oversimplifies both their interests and the way in which these countries engage with the maritime domain. Rather than simply being constrained by their geography, LLS navigate wide-ranging challenges to assert their maritime interests.

One key analytical point that emerges from this discussion is the tension between legal entitlements and practical enforcement. While UNCLOS and other international treaties formally recognise LLS' rights to transit and equitable access to maritime resources, these rights are ultimately mediated by coastal states. As demonstrated in Ethiopia's case, negotiations over access to ports and SLOCs are shaped by political and economic leverage, rather than the guarantees provided under international law. This points to the limitations of international legal frameworks in securing access for LLS, suggesting that their effectiveness is contingent on the geopolitical and economic realities of transit corridors.

Another significant issue is the extent to which LLS can mitigate their reliance on transit states. Infrastructure investments, such as Ethiopia's engagement in trade corridors, illustrate a strategic effort to diversify access points and reduce the vulnerability brought on by relying on a single state or port for its trade. However, these efforts are not merely economic—they reflect an awareness that maritime access is inseparable from broader geopolitical positioning. Ethiopia's recent decision to rebuild a navy, for instance, points to an attempt to shape Red Sea security dynamics, despite it lacking a coastline. This points to questions of whether LLS can successfully assert influence in maritime governance beyond their legal rights, using regional power dynamics, diplomacy and security partnerships.

Furthermore, the involvement of LLS in climate governance and maritime security complicates the assumption that maritime issues are inherently the domain of coastal states. The case of LLS' engaging in the BBNJ negotiations as well as regional anti-piracy efforts provide examples of how they actively participate in shaping maritime governance. The framing of climate change as a maritime issue does not preclude LLS from playing a role, especially given the transboundary nature of environmental challenges. This suggests that discussions on maritime governance need to move beyond a rigid land-sea dichotomy to consider how states without direct sea access are nevertheless implicated in and contribute to maritime policymaking.

From a policy perspective, Casal and Selamé (2015) suggest that including sea-access in the sustainable development goals could be one way of overcoming some of the challenges associated with negotiating and enforcing access, positively linking sea-access to development trajectories and thus, proving a reasonable, feasible and cheap goal to achieve. This approach reframes engagement in the maritime domain as an economic necessity, rather than a geopolitical concession. Ergo, if maritime access were positioned as a development right, rather than an issue of bilateral negotiation or a coastal state's magnanimity, it could shift the dynamics of how LLS secure and sustain access to global trade routes.

Ultimately, this article attempts to demonstrate that LLS are not necessarily passive recipients of maritime policies nor always solely constrained by their geography. Instead, they actively engage in a variety of strategies to shape their own maritime futures despite normative and structural constraints. Understanding this engagement requires moving beyond simplistic notions of dependence to recognise LLS as having the potential to be assertive actors in maritime affairs. Future scholarship and policy discussions should further explore how LLS can leverage international norms, regional alliances and economic strategies to redefine their position in the maritime domain. Indeed, the dynamic engagement of LLS in maritime affairs calls for a reassessment of their role in global ocean politics.

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