



Geocultural Power in Foreign Policy



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Introduction

Why do foreign policy actors mobilize cultural and historical narratives to advance their foreign policy objectives? This policy brief explores the significance of *geocultural power* in understanding foreign policymaking in the Red Sea region, where, for instance, the Turkish government recurrently refers to its historical obligations towards the Horn of Africa or where Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy invokes the Aksumite Empire to assert the country's present right to accessing the sea. Geocultural power refers to the capacity of political actors to invoke specific historical and cultural narratives, and arrange them across space, in order to advance foreign policy objectives. The brief outlines the concept of geocultural power, distinguishing it from traditional geopolitics and geoeconomics, and illustrates its utility with examples from Ethiopia's evolving relations with the Gulf States and Turkey's increasing engagement in the Horn of Africa.

The Red Sea region is undergoing rapid geopolitical transformation, driven by a combination of bilateral and multilateral partnerships between Middle Eastern states and countries in the Horn of Africa (HoA).¹ These evolving alliances are reshaping the region's strategic landscape. Key developments include heightened competition for access to the sea, involving

both regional and external actors. Notably, landlocked Ethiopia, along with Middle Eastern powers such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are actively seeking influence in the area, exacerbating existing rivalries. Tensions are particularly acute between Ethiopia and Somalia, after the former signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland. Somalia, in concert with Egypt, strongly object to the planned Ethiopian lease of a chunk of Somaliland's coastline for the establishment of a naval force.² Simultaneously, the Red Sea region is attracting increased attention from global powers. The United States, Russia, European nations, and China have all intensified their engagement, with China in particular expanding its presence through trade hubs and economic investments. Additionally, attacks on maritime vessels in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait by Yemeni Houthi forces have raised significant international security concerns, further amplifying the need for coordinated responses.

Given these dynamics, the Red Sea region is increasingly recognized as a critical site of geopolitical importance. Policymakers and analysts are closely monitoring these developments and assess their implications for regional stability, international trade, and security frameworks. At the same time, while traditional geopolitical and geoeconomic perspectives provide important insight into

¹ The Red Sea region is defined broadly in this policy brief. On the Eastern coast of the Red Sea are Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and on its African coast are Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt. Also, included as part of the region are Egypt, Israel, and Jordan, which share the Gulf of Aqaba in the northern part of the Red Sea basin. Ethiopia, which has no direct access to the sea,

and Somalia and Somaliland, which are located in the Gulf of Aden, are also considered as forming part of the region. We also include Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait on the Arabian Peninsula.

² Bakonyi 2024; Hagmann & Stepputat 2022; Mengiste 2022.



the region's current developments, those traditional lenses tend to overlook the ways in which historical and cultural narratives are mobilized to shape state interactions and influence patterns of conflict, competition, and collaboration.

Why Geocultural Power?

Geocultural power is an analytical perspective that highlights the capacity to mobilize specific historical, religious, and cultural narratives and their geographical distribution for political ends.³ Tim Winter's analysis of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrates how the Chinese government strategically invokes the historical narrative of the "Silk Road" to justify the expansive reach of its modern infrastructure projects.⁴ Similarly, many states employ historical, religious, and civilizational narratives—such as Islamic, Jewish, and Christian values, or the Ottoman legacy—to legitimize their foreign policy actions and foster solidarity.

A perspective on the geocultural differs from related concepts such as geopolitics or geoeconomics. Geopolitics traditionally addresses how geographical conditions shape state behavior, using familiar tropes such as countries as buffer zones or international politics as a "Great Game." Geoeconomics, in turn, focuses on the use of economic tools to advance national interests, particularly in relation to the strategic geography of trade routes and resource distribution.⁵ However, both geopolitical and

geoeconomic approaches face limitations in accounting for the cultural dimensions of foreign policy. The concept of *soft power*—popularized after the Cold War—filled part of this gap, recognizing the importance of a state's cultural influence in international relations.⁶ Yet soft power, often aligned with *cultural diplomacy*, remains focused on direct interactions between states, leaving insufficient room for understanding how cultural and historical narratives reshape the conceptualization of geopolitical space and influence policy decisions more broadly.

Geocultural power complements and extends beyond soft power by emphasizing the strategic use of cultural and historical narratives to frame past events in service of contemporary political goals. Through geocultural narratives contested or ambiguous histories are converted into assets for geo-strategic claim-making. This form of power highlights a state's capacity to structure the field of action of other players in international relations by creating an understanding of history that multiple stakeholders can embrace as a foundation for collaboration and international engagement.⁷ In doing so, geocultural power aims at strengthening a state's strategic position.

In the context of the Red Sea region, geocultural power allows policymakers to better understand how regional actors draw on historical registers to justify their geopolitical maneuvers, particularly as they compete for influence and collaboration in an increasingly contested strategic space.

³ Bachmann et al. 2025.

⁴ Winter 2019, 2022.

⁵ Luttwak 1990; Nickel 2024.

⁶ Nye 1990; Nye 2009.

⁷ Winter 2019, 2022; see also Hannerz 2009.



Understanding these narratives is crucial for navigating the complexities of foreign policymaking in the Red Sea region, where varying historical, cultural, and religious connections play a pivotal role in shaping both regional dynamics and the broader geopolitical landscape.

To illustrate the use of geocultural power in foreign policy, the cases of Ethiopia and Turkey provide relevant examples.

Ethiopia's Civilizational Narrative and Turkey's Ottoman Legacy

Ethiopia is currently redefining its position in the Red Sea region through a series of bilateral agreements with states such as the Saudi Arabia, Somaliland, Turkey, UAE, and Israel. These engagements, accelerated under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration, mark a departure from the more cautious foreign policy stance of previous Ethiopian regimes.⁸ This shift has been framed not only through geopolitical and geoeconomic lenses but also through geocultural narratives, as reflected in key ideological and official discourses.

Specifically, the philosophy of *Medemer* (meaning "synergy" or "togetherness") of PM Abiy, which despite differing perspectives continues to be a central theme in the country's political and social discussions, emphasizes the historical and geographical interconnections between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, viewing these regions as a "single geopolitical space" where the Red Sea serves not as a boundary but as a

"bridge" uniting the two.⁹ The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) leverages this narrative, particularly focusing on religious and historical ties. For example, Ethiopia's role in providing sanctuary to the followers of the Prophet Mohammed during the First Hijra and its significant Muslim population are positioned to highlight Ethiopia's enduring relationships with Arab countries. Likewise, Ethiopia's historical and religious ties are actively used to reinforce contemporary diplomatic relations with Israel. The Ministry presents Ethiopia's relationship with Israel as having originated with "King Solomon of Israel and Queen Saba (Sheba)" and sustained through the practice of "an ancient version of the Jewish religion... in Ethiopia," where "a significant number of persons following this religion lived in Ethiopia and moved to Israel in the late 1980s." Additionally, the Ministry's narrative frames Ethiopia's diplomatic ties with Israel as being rooted in the presence of "its ancient monasteries, monuments, and cultural heritage in Israel" and its historical interest in their preservations.¹⁰

These geocultural narratives are also evident in Ethiopia's recent vision for maritime access, introduced by Prime Minister Abiy in October 2023. While Ethiopia's pursuit of access to ports is not new, Abiy's framing of this issue as a sovereign right is distinctive. He invokes the civilizational legacy of the Kingdom of Axum, which historically controlled vast areas along the Red Sea.¹¹ This narrative is further strengthened by references to Ethiopian generals and leaders from the past, reinforcing the notion that Ethiopia's historical claims to the Red Sea

⁸ Verhoeven & Woldemariam 2022.

⁹ Ahmed 2023.

¹⁰ MFA of Ethiopia 2025.

¹¹ Ethiopian Broadcasting Agency 2023.



region extend into the present. By incorporating visual elements, such as historical images of Emperor Haile Selassie by the Red Sea, Abiy underscores the continuity of Ethiopia's connection to the Sea, invoking the historical legitimacy of Ethiopia's maritime ambitions.

In sum, Ethiopia's foreign policy, particularly its quest for maritime access and regional influence, is being strategically advanced through the mobilization of geocultural power, blending historical, religious, and civilizational narratives with contemporary geopolitical strategies.

The second case illustrating the significance of geocultural power in foreign policy is Turkey's expanding engagement in sub-Saharan Africa and the broader African continent over the past two decades.¹² Departing from the Kemalist orientation towards the West, which positioned Turkey as a "bridge" between Europe and the Middle East, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) has redefined Turkey's role as a "central country"—an independent and assertive actor capable of shaping global and regional affairs.¹³ This approach has positioned Turkey as a unique actor, straddling both a universal-humanitarian stance and a nationalist-exceptionalist narrative rooted in Ottoman political thought. The concept of *Millet-i Hakime* (the "ruling nation")—which suggests the superiority of Turks over other Muslim populations—forms the foundation of Turkey's nationalist rhetoric.

At the same time, Turkey's humanitarian engagements, such as its response to the 2011 famine in Somalia, are framed as part of its moral mission to act as the "conscience of the world." The latter term was coined by Ahmet Davutoğlu, former foreign minister and strategist for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as part of Turkey's "humanitarian diplomacy" as a balance of "conscience and power".¹⁴ According to Davutoğlu, conscience without power is weakness, and power without conscience is cruelty. The Turkish approach to humanitarian diplomacy is built on a blend of universal values, religious solidarity and anticolonialism on the one hand and the unique Ottoman legacy and Turkish exceptionalism on the other. A central vehicle for Turkey's geocultural influence in Africa is the *Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)*. TIKA undertakes numerous initiatives to revive memories of the Ottoman past, such as restoring the house of Ali Dinar, the sultan of Darfur and an Ottoman ally, in Sudan, and renovating the former Ottoman consulate in Harar, Ethiopia. These projects serve to reinforce Turkey's historical and cultural ties to Africa, positioning it as a non-colonial power with deep historical responsibilities. In its broader efforts to enhance its prestige in the Islamic world, TIKA has also restored the mausoleum of Najashi, a seventh-century king of Axum, who protected early Muslims from persecution in Mecca. These symbolic actions emphasize Turkey's role as a guardian of shared Islamic heritage, and they strengthen Turkey's soft power influence across the Horn of Africa.

¹² Donelli 2021

¹³ Davutoğlu 2013, 866; Erdoğan & Hisarlıoğlu 2022; Yavuz 2022.

¹⁴ TIKA 2019.



Turkey's engagement in Africa, therefore, invokes a historical responsibility rooted in its Ottoman past. As the self-proclaimed "inheritor of 700 years of Ottoman history," Turkey presents itself as a protector of its *tarihdaş* ("people sharing the same history").¹⁵ Davutoğlu emphasizes that history compels Turkey to take on new regional missions, dictated by historical legacies and responsibilities. He argues that history exceeds individual will and exerts influence over daily politics, requiring Turkey to act in accordance with its historical role.

Conclusions

References to unique or shared historical legacies abound in the contemporary international relations between Middle Eastern states and the Horn of Africa. Coming to terms with who mobilizes what geocultural narrative for which foreign policy claims is critical for a full understanding of the dynamics in this pivotal area. In this policy brief we argued that conventional geopolitical and geoeconomic perspectives on the region, which emphasize how capable players project their agenda onto the region through security or economic means, have limited analytical means to account for the historical and cultural narratives on imagining new political orders that pervade current Red Sea dynamics. Those narratives may find their expression in nationalist, civilizational, universalist or humanitarian

forms aimed at claiming sovereign prerogatives or at identifying common ground in the past as a base for carving out a joint future.

By integrating this perspective, policymakers and stakeholders can develop more nuanced, contextually informed approaches to engagement in the region, ensuring that cultural and historical dynamics are effectively considered in diplomatic and geopolitical strategies.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

- ***Strategic Significance of the Red Sea Region:*** The Red Sea region is emerging as a global hotspot of geopolitical interest, marked by the establishment of military bases, infrastructure projects, and intensified competition for leadership. Policymakers must recognize the complexity of this strategic environment, shaped by both regional and global actors and the various forms of power they wield.
- ***Incorporating Geocultural Power in Analysis:*** Geocultural power is a critical tool for understanding foreign policy dynamics in the Red Sea region. It highlights the ways in which culture, religion, and history are strategically mobilized by states to build alliances, legitimize claims, and influence cooperation.

¹⁵ Davutoğlu quoted in Saraçoğlu and Demirkol 2015, 314.



- ***Holistic Approach to Regional Analysis:***
To fully comprehend the ongoing shifts in the Red Sea region, analysts must integrate geocultural narratives alongside geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors driving state behavior and regional reconfigurations.



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