

HISTORY

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A Critical Evaluation of the Political Dynamics of the Post-1991 Ethiopian-Eritrean Relations: Security Implications for the Greater Horn & Sahel Regions

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Abstract: After a protracted conflict from 1962 to 1991, Eritrea finally won its de facto independence in 1991 and got de jure independence via a referendum in 1993, effectively splitting from Ethiopia. From 1991 to 1998, the two countries maintained cordial relations until another war between them broke out in 1998. Relations continued to be strained from 1998 to 2018, and during this period, Eritrea remained one of Ethiopia's troubling security challenges in foreign policy endeavors. Unlike other neighbors within the Greater Horn of Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea have had a complex relationship, that is, one of unity and separation, war and peace, hate and love, cooperation and competition. However, in 2018, a historic peace deal was signed

between the two states, where they pledged to ‘bury their past’ and bring a new dawn to their relations. In 2020, Eritrea joined the Ethiopian government's side in the Tigray Conflict, further strengthening the alliance. But how the Tigray conflict concluded in 2022 strained their relations. This was aggravated by the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland. The MoU is part of Ethiopia's aim to get access to the sea and become a naval power, which has raised concern because it has bypassed Somalia and signed a deal with a territory that Somalia considers to be under its jurisdiction. Furthermore, Somaliland is not recognized as a state by key organizations such as the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and the Arab League. Therefore, such a brazen move of disregarding the sovereignty of Somalia has, understandably, increased Eritrea’s suspicion that there might be more ominous political motives at play than meets the eye. This is because Eritrea and its ports were part of Ethiopia for around three decades, and Ethiopia's concentration on acquiring a 'breathing space' raised the prospect of reclaiming Eritrean ports. Consequently, Eritrea, Somalia, and Egypt collaborated by signing an agreement accentuating the right to protect neighbors' sovereignty. This tripartite treaty works as a form of hedging or buffer against an increasingly assertive Ethiopia. While a full-scale conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is unlikely, the implications of their weakening relations could cause considerable spillover security effects beyond the region. These security challenges could potentially create an opportune environment for various rebel groups, including jihadists, to reassert themselves. For instance, the current conflict in Sudan, where two rival army factions are jostling for power, implies that both camps are soliciting and receiving support from various interested actors within and outside the region. This situation provides an avenue for potential proxy wars to ensue because volatile environments only work to strengthen rebel networks, as dissidents thrive mainly in weak and conflict-ridden states. In the

current Ethiopian Eritrean standoff, the Sudanese crisis is a significant variable to consider because Sudan is surrounded by prime arms-trafficking Sahel hubs, where weapons are smuggled through Libya, Chad, and the Central African Republic. Thus, the fundamental goal of this study is to critically analyze (especially) the post-2018 Ethiopian-Eritrean relations and gauge their tenability through a neoclassical realism theoretical lens. The findings suggest that due to competing interests by various domestic, regional and international actors in the Horn of Africa, coupled with the covert activities of rebel factions in the Sahel, the Ethiopian- Eritrean relations will continue to be precarious and may only be regulated by the change of the regime or by the balance of power politics. Data for this study were gathered through content analysis of literature, digital ethnography, and online sources.

Key words: Ethiopia, Eritrea, foreign policy, Horn & Sahel security, national interest, neoclassical realism.

Introduction

Ethiopia's historical pedigree of thousands of years in international and diplomatic relations with other states renders it (at least in theory) an influential regional player in foreign policy matters. As one of the oldest states in Africa, Ethiopia has a rich history stretching from the civilization works of the ancient kingdoms of Abyssinia and Aksum, and over time, it has managed to protect its identity as a regional power.

Until 1974, Ethiopia was ruled by emperors and never colonized by Western powers. The Adwa battle victory against Italian colonizers in 1896 created a new tone of African resistance against colonialism and imperialism (Crummey & Marcus, 2024). Internationally, Ethiopia's political weight can be illustrated by the fact that it is now a member of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), adding a

significant profile to its name. At the continental level, Ethiopia is the seat of the AU and prides itself on having the largest commercial airline network in Africa.

This study critically examines the dynamics of the seemingly ever-changing post-1991 Ethio-Eritrea relations. The research questions for this study are: (1) What is the extent of the tenability of Ethiopian-Eritrean relations given their contrasting foreign policy ideologies? (2) What are the regional implications of the fragile Ethiopian-Eritrean relations? In analyzing the interplay of domestic and external factors in Ethiopian-Eritrean relations, this study uses the tenets of neoclassical realist theory. Neoclassical realism examines systemic elements, such as security dilemmas, anarchy, polarity, relative power distribution, state-level factors, and national interests (Rose, 1998; Firoozabadi & Mojtaba, 2016). Although there has been relative peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea since 2018, recent developments in January 2024, where Ethiopia signed a seaport access treaty with Somaliland, a territory that is not recognized as a state and which Somalia regards as part of its land, have stirred security concerns. Consequently, Eritrea, Somalia, and Egypt signed an agreement (in August 2024) that emphasized respect for the sovereignty of neighbors. The trio's treaty is a subtle rebuke of Ethiopia's maneuvers to get a seaport, seemingly at all costs through Somaliland (The Global Herald, 2024).

From a neoclassical realist's perspective, Ethiopia's foreign policy has been shaped by internal factors, such as leaders' idiosyncrasies, national interests, military and technological capabilities, and external factors, such as the anarchical nature of the international system, international regulations, and the balance of power politics. External sub-regional variables, such as regional geopolitics, the security and strategic nature of the Horn of Africa, the Nile River factor, the controversy over Egypt and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and the Red Sea corridor access

tensions with Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia have been among the key policy-determining elements (Woldemariam & Donnellon-May, 2024).

In Ethiopia, swift political dynamics unfolded between 2015 and 2018, where a wave of civil disobedience rocked the country, forcing Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn to resign in 2018 (Sintayehu, 2024). His successor, Abiy Ahmed, immediately embarked on a radical political reform agenda. Internally, he released political prisoners who had been incarcerated by his predecessors, but most significantly, he pledged to end the torture of detainees, which was prevalent in Ethiopian jails. He also lifted bans on media outlets and began a partial privatization programme for certain state-owned enterprises. Externally, he reached out to long-time hostile neighbors, such as Eritrea, with whom he signed a historic peace agreement in July 2018. Thus, this political transformation in Ethiopia, together with a new foreign policy direction, broke the deadlock and signaled the start of the optimistic, yet still uncertain, relationship with Eritrea (Underwood, 2018).

From a neoclassical realist vantage point, the anarchical structure of the international system, the uncertain nature of other nations' intentions, the self-interested nature of states, and the propensity for hegemony make states uncomfortable with their neighbors' (perceived) security transformations.

Notably, the global political order is always changing, with more actors on board and more global challenges such as lingering poverty, trade imbalances, threats to national sovereignty, and nationalism on the rise. All of these factors encourage countries to adopt self-help strategies for survival. Ethiopia's recent focus on policy shift strategy from the Nile River politics (GERD) to the Red Sea port access ambitions needs caution. To live sustainably with neighbors, Ethiopia's ambitious steps need the *endorsement* of its regional partners; that is, Ethiopia needs to prioritize policy formalization to establish formal institutions that bind its relations, especially with Eritrea (Gebrewahd, 2019).

The current mutual suspicion and geopolitical competition for dominance cannot easily be resolved until the historical reasons that contributed to these tensions are properly analyzed and addressed. Prudent acts of settling tensions and creating confidence-building mechanisms between Eritrea and Ethiopia must consider the needs of people at the grassroots level as an important element that can anchor their interdependence (Aweke & Seid, 2023).

In elucidating the themes of this study, a neoclassical realist theory was used for illustrative purposes to appreciate the power dynamics at play between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Data supporting the inferences of this study were gathered using content analysis of literature on Horn politics, digital ethnography, and other online sources.

Overview of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Relations

The ties between Ethiopia - the region's lynchpin - and its neighbor Eritrea (a country that broke away from Ethiopia in 1991/1993 after 30 years of armed civil conflicts) are unique in the region because the people of both countries are not only interconnected by culture; but also closely related by blood, language, history, and mythology. In addition, both are defined by commonalities in cultural features, religious practices, historical ties, political interdependence, and economic linkages. Above all, their relations have been defined by an interconnected regional security conundrum in which security concerns, such as the threat posed by insurgencies, affect all states; hence, their concerns regarding regional security are inextricably linked (Eritrean Press, 2018).

Ethiopia's government changed in 1991 when the ruling military junta (the Derg) was deposed by a coalition of rebels led mainly by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Back in 1962, Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia, an action that spurred a conflict of three decades of fighting that momentarily ended in 1991/1993 after the referendum vote, in which

Eritreans overwhelmingly chose to break away from Ethiopia. Thus, since 1993, their relationship started well under the 1993 Agreement of coordinating their political, social, and economic activities, which included the idea of adopting collective positions on the situation in Somalia and Sudan, as well as in international forums such as the AU and the UN (Belachew, 2024).

However, this initial optimism in their bilateral relations gradually began to take a different trajectory and degenerated into mutual suspicion, fierce rivalry, outright enmity, and a bloody war when the two failed to respect the terms of the 1993 Agreement. For instance, the war broke out in 1998 over the Badme border dispute. Militarily, Ethiopia prevailed over Eritrea, but the matter was taken to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague, which ruled in favor of Eritrea. Both sides signed the Algiers Agreement in December 2000 to formally end hostilities (Quinn & Akyol, 2021).

The Eritrean-Ethiopian war was satirically framed as ‘two bald men fighting over a comb’, or two foolish regimes engaging in a brutal and bloody war for a piece of insignificant land that lacked both oil and diamonds. The connotation of ‘bald men’ was in apparent reference to the two leaders’ bald heads (i.e., Meles Zenawi and Isaias Afwerki) (Reid, 2003). By the time the war ended in June 2000, Berouk (2012) opined that it had claimed an estimated 100,000 people, displaced around one million people, and squandered a generation of development opportunities from both sides. Although Badme was granted to Eritrea, Ethiopia was reluctant to hand over the Badme region, and a new phase of ‘no peace, no war’ prevailed from 2000 to 2018 (Makonnen, 2017). The map below shows an overview of the northern part of Ethiopia.



Figure 1. Overview of Northern Ethiopia.

Source: Displacement. iom.int, 2023.

Despite the Algiers settlement in 2000, occasional flare-ups still occurred, especially in border areas. During this ‘Cold War’ style era, Eritrea pursued a foreign policy centered on ‘isolationism’ combined with opportunistic support for any armed insurgents who were opposed to Ethiopia. On the other hand, Ethiopia was actively implementing most of its foreign policy towards Eritrea, which was specified in its 2002 foreign policy objectives, such as eliminating Eritrea’s subversive activities, ensuring containment and isolation of Eritrea, and applying international pressure on the regime (Berouk, 2012; Belachew, 2024).

These hostilities (mainly from 2002) continued until 2018, when a new political order was ushered in Ethiopia. It is argued that during this period of continued instability (from 2002 to 2018), Eritrea’s domestic policies militarized the state through mandatory and indefinite army conscription of citizens as a buffer against occasional skirmishes and perceived threats (Sintayehu, 2024). However, most Eritreans saw this militarization as

a repressive political tool; hence, most young Eritreans fled the country. Those caught fleeing were brutally dealt with, creating a tense political environment that made Eritrea a pariah state in the region and beyond (Underwood, 2018).

The international community rallied with Ethiopia in condemning the aggressive Eritrean policy of supporting Ethiopian rebels and creating an oppressive domestic environment. Ethiopia used its leverage to isolate Eritrea internationally by declaring it an aggressor. As a result, Eritrea was unable to obtain aid as its ties with the West were severed, and the isolation also included certain Middle Eastern sources of aid/funding. This resulted in Eritrea being politically unstable, diplomatically isolated, and economically fragile (Belachew, 2024).

Neoclassical Realism: Conceptual & Theoretical Arguments

In international relations (IR), countries fear that a (perceived) powerful neighbor could potentially undermine their national interests and threaten their security and existence. In other words, suspicion of potential aggression from others and their (perceived) ambitions of territorial expansion, coupled with a competitive and conflictual international system, contributes to the entrenched idea of self-help (Rose, 1998; Zakaria, 1998; Schweller, 2004).

John Mearsheimer, one of the leading contemporary IR scholars (from the offensive realist school) argues that international politics in the context of states desiring to gain dominance, power and hegemony (often at all costs) has always been a ruthless and dangerous business and is likely to remain so for a foreseeable future (Meibauer, 2021, pp. 350-351).

Realism has been the main IR theory, but over time, alternatives to realist schools have emerged with varied expressions and standpoints (Brooks, 1997; Rose, 1998; Snyder, 2002).

Realist theories derive different viewpoints on issues of conflict, war, domestic politics, and the dynamics of the international system. In IR theories such as neorealism (or structural realism) and neoliberalism, state behaviors are assumed to be predetermined through time and space, such that historical analyses are consigned as foundations for validating foreign policy theories. The only IR theory that is propelled towards accounts of context, change, and specificity of time and place is constructivist. Realists assert that an anarchical system produces various similar tensions in the context of opportunities, incentives, constraints, and threats that determine a state's interests. As such, states always assess other states' relative capabilities to ascertain the potential level of threat they may present (Meibauer, 2021).

For this study, neoclassical realism, which is one of the variants of mainstream realist theory, was chosen to navigate the intrigues of the Ethiopian-Eritrean relations. Like mainstream realist suppositions, neoclassical realism also regards humans and states as selfish actors who prioritize their interests, benefits, and survival. This rationalist understanding of states mainly influences their actions. Furthermore, power allocation among states (polarity) and the anarchical structure of the international system foster a sense of competitiveness and insecurity (Rose, 1998). The power capabilities of states have a variety of elements and degrees verifiable by interested parties. This means that states respond to other states' powers and presumed intentions through various strategies, such as band wagoning. This situation then produces macro patterns that do not rely on historical premises or any specific situational context but instead emanate from unfolding security dilemmas.

Contrary to neorealism, which sees international structure as an independent variable, neoclassical realism sees the international system as a dependent variable. Thus, for neoclassical realists, the system cannot be directly swayed; that is, any effects exerted on the system must emanate from an intervening factor, meaning that units cannot interrelate with the structure. In other words, the impact of power capabilities on the international policies of a state is indirect because systematic weights must be converted through intervening proportions at the unit level. Domestic-level variables are the central pieces of the chain, and one of those crucial variables is the elite's perception of power distribution. Neoclassical realists do not agree with the neorealist supposition that tensions in the international structure are immediately converted into units of action. Thus, neoclassical realists offer a more linked and stronger chain of a country's relative power within the anarchical system (Omar, 2013).

Although some proponents of neoclassical realism assert that neoclassical realism is a logical extension of structural realism, Ripsman et al. (2016) argue that neoclassical realism is much more than merely a supposed extension. Unlike structural realism, neoclassical realism can predict political events, both the short-term and long-term patterns of foreign policy mechanics. In other words, neoclassical realism explains foreign policy by factoring both domestic and international elements (Ibrahim & Dawood, 2016). It focuses on assessing variables that explain states' behaviors through a critical examination of the trends in the international system, such as the balance of power politics. In this way, neoclassical realism presents itself as a more intuitive route for identifying and resolving the intrigues of international relations.

Specifically, the theory attempts to establish, under what conditions, and which intervening variables are most useful at a given time. For instance, if there is no immediate security threat, domestic variables will be prioritized. In doing so,

neoclassical realism fills the gap within the realist school vis-à-vis explanations of how foreign policies are adopted (Ibrahim & Dawood, 2016).

Cerioli (2024) argues that neoclassical realism is a varied analytical framework that complements a system with unit-level variables to contextualize and differentiate actors while leaving some space for agency due to anarchical pressures. So, in the main, neoclassical realism is premised on the idea that the systemic explanation of world politics offered by other realist theories is insufficient. For explanations to be sufficient, they must necessarily include unit-level variables, such as state structure, state capabilities, how power is perceived, and how leadership is exercised. Domestic elements such as the political system, domestic institutions, and leadership can all impact how a state perceives its security and the actions of its neighbors. Relative power, which occurs when a neighboring country has considerable growth in military, political, and economic stature, can provoke sentiments of envy and a desire to defuse or balance the perceived threat (Zakaria, 1998).

Neoclassical realists contend that while leaders' stubbornness may cause diplomatic deadlocks, their broader vision, strategic calculations, and political influence (rather than political power per se) can lead to positive changes in bilateral and international relations, nurturing cooperation and reducing conflict (Firoozabadi & Mojtaba, 2016).

Meibauer (2021) notes that neoclassical realists' core premise means that they can engage in other IR theories comparatively, especially regarding the empirical accuracy of the phenomenon. Therefore, in contrast to many IR theories, neoclassical realism explicitly examines the conversion of external inducements into state behaviors with an outside-in approach to policy analyses. Neoclassical realism offers a framework in which a meticulous vision of a country's foreign policy can be achieved.

Based on the assertions of Meibauer (2021), neoclassical realism's main contribution to IR theory is that it endeavors to explain disparities in state decisions on foreign policy

over time and space using unit-level variables that mediate the impact of methodical inducement. In this way, states are presumed to have sufficient leeway to determine their priorities because the structure merely sets limits for state behaviors.

Thus, for states, their options are mainly constrained by domestic incentives, and to overcome those constraints, most neoclassical realists resort to the politics of Morgenthau and Machiavelli - the politics of bamboozling political tactics where leaders apply their *craft and wisdom* that papers over the cracks to derive optimal gains from otherwise challenging situations.

However, critics of neoclassical theory, such as Cerioli (2024), Ayoob (2002), Escude (1998), and Yan (2019), argue that all IR theories take a Global North strand, ignoring Global South experiences. If IR theories ignore local African knowledge reservoirs and sources of security threats, they will continue to be insufficient to explain phenomena outside the Global North. This argument is even more profound, given that within the realist school, realist strands vary in terms of arguments, methods, and epistemology. Marked differences exist in how various strands of realism are formulated and argued. Examples of these variants include classical realism (by Morgenthau, Carr, and Machiavelli), neoclassical realism (by Gedion Rose), defensive realism (by Kenneth Waltz), and offensive realism (by John Mearsheimer), and both defensive and offensive realism being branches of structural realism.

These multifaceted traditions and strands underscore the need for IR to tap into knowledge from all corners of the globe. The same can be argued about other IR theories, such as liberalism by John Locke and J.S. Mill, and neoliberalism by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (Waltz, 2000; Keohane, 2012; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Ayoob (2002) and Escude (1998) are especially critical of the asymmetrical distribution of economic power among states and how that power conditions international attitudes in what they call the periphery. Without addressing these aspects at the unit and

systematic levels, neoclassical realism can limit the durability of its theoretical cogency in Africa. The question that needs to be posed is: Why do IR scholars not seek to understand the peculiar mechanics of IR in Africa? For instance, Cerioli (2024) argues that the emergence of IR theories, such as neoclassical realism, premised on a Westernized viewpoint, should make Western scholars begin to see their flaws, biases, and parochialism, and question which voices they omit and why.

External Destabilizing Factors in the Politics of the Horn of Africa

External influences in Ethiopian-Eritrean relations have been a significant factor in undermining the sovereignty of countries of the Greater Horn of Africa due to the great power competition for natural resources, ideological influence, and hegemonic control. Like the rest of Africa, the Horn region has largely been used by outside powers as a proxy space for their power struggles, which are essentially triggered by natural resources, such as oil, precious minerals, natural gas, and vast portions of unutilized land.

The instabilities that ensue due to these proxy power struggles, have weakened the Horn states and created an opportune condition for non-state actors such as Al-Shabaab to take advantage of the state's fragility to propel their banditry activities, including jihadism, often setting havens in vast ungoverned spaces of states (Reno, 2002; Frazer, 2008). Conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea stretch into the 1960s and were a result of interference from Western powers, who have all along profited from those conflicts. In elaborating this argument, President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea said:

... for us, the period between 1941 and 1952, when we were a British protectorate, was a transitional period. It was then that the superpowers determined that Ethiopia would serve as their proxy for the region. Because of that, we were

denied our rights. The price we paid due to foreign interference in our matters is very high. The Ethiopian governments in the past were carrying out plans and agendas for foreign powers. There is no real reason for the animosity between Eritrea and Ethiopia (Ministry of Information, Eritrea, Interview script, February 26, 2021; AllAfrica, 2021).

The map below shows how foreign powers have asserted themselves on the African soil to further their economic interests.



Figure 2. Great power competition for African resources.

Source: Institute for Security Studies/Geopolitical Futures, 2021.

Occasionally, questions have been raised regarding the significance of foreign policy within the current international political framework. Foreign policy should be premised

on a realistic evaluation of the strengths and limitations of a given state, as well as a clear understanding of regional and global developments.

Foreign policy may be described as a set of strategic guidelines that encompass the objectives and interests pursued and defended by a given state in its interactions with others, as well as the means it uses to realize and defend those interests. Arguments concerning globalization and the increase in interdependence have broadened the scope of interactions between or among states, and the distinctions between *home* and *abroad*, *inside* and *outside*, are becoming blurred, making it more difficult to sustain domestic politics that lack broader consideration of foreign politics (Heywood, 2015). However, the global experience today shows the revival of nationalism, especially in the West, and this situation seems to be dividing the world rather than bringing states together under the platform of globalization. Thus, foreign policy is key to managing international relations and assisting states as they navigate their security, economic, or hegemonic aims (Fukuyama, 2018).

Despite its economic potential and strategic significance as a region that geographically commands the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the northwestern edge of the Indian Ocean, the Horn region has been known for decades as one of the poorest and most underdeveloped regions in the world. Further, it is also known as one of the hot spots of internal dissidence, inter-state conflicts, violence, and a haven for non-state actors, such as the Al Shabaab militants (Roba & Berouk, 2011).

Bereketeab (2013) argues that conflict, which is the biggest hindrance to the prosperity of the region, is commonly caused by poverty and bad governance practices, such as marginalization, alienation, inequality, and discrimination against certain groups. Consequently, the lack of broader legitimacy of the regime renders states weak and hence prone to various (external) machinations, such as intervention, neo-colonial trends, terrorism, and piracy. External neocolonial influences, i.e., the politics of the

‘tormentor’ craftily playing the ‘savior’ role, have been a major destabilizing factor in African politics. In Ethiopia, there seems to be a political culture based on pitting one ethnic group against another, which is a form of institutionalized ethnicity. As such, the ensuing chaos provides an excuse for external actors to intervene and manage the chaos. (Ministry of Information Eritrea, Interview script, February 26, 2021; AllAfrica, 2021).

The Post-2018 Ethiopian-Eritrean Relations: Examining the Tenability of Those Relations

The post-2018 phase of Ethiopian-Eritrean relations, known as ‘vague and uncertain,’ began in April 2018, when a popular movement within Ethiopia forced the ruling EPRDF party to undergo internal reforms, ushering in Abiy Ahmed as a new Prime Minister. This became a critical juncture in the Ethiopian-Eritrean relations. In his inaugural speech, Abiy proclaimed the end of a two-decade diplomatic standoff with Eritrea, calling for an end to animosity due to deep-rooted historical grievances and urging the stabilization of relations. In June 2018, Ethiopia unequivocally stated that it would accept and fully implement the 2002 UN Boundary Commission’s decision, that is, that the disputed Badme region belongs to Eritrea (Stauffer, 2018).

The Eritrean government regarded this declaration as a significant diplomatic triumph and responded positively to the efforts of the new Ethiopian leadership. With this positive development, Eritrea declared that it was ready to normalize relations and would send a mission to Ethiopia as a way of gauging unfolding developments directly and in depth (Dereje, 2019). In June 2018, the first high-level Eritrean team led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Osman Saleh Mohammed, arrived in Ethiopia for comprehensive policy discussions (Getachew, 2020).

The new Ethiopian administration took office with its own domestic and foreign policy challenges. In his new book, *Medemer* (Amharic for ‘synergy’), Prime Minister Abiy

made his commitment open to the public on his idea of collaboration for a common goal. The book advocates peaceful coexistence, equal partnership, and equitable distribution of rewards and obligations with neighboring countries, rather than relying on aggression and force. The book further emphasizes that Ethiopia's regional policy will be implemented through the process of revitalizing and strengthening the sub-regional organization, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (Abiy, 2019). Consequently, a new Foreign Policy Draft of 2019 was published in response to the unfolding changes in domestic, regional, and global settings that incorporated Ethiopia's shifting nature of influence in international affairs. This document outlines several national interest policies and those that foster regional economic and social ties, cooperate to advance peace and security, and attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (Quinn & Akyol, 2021).

This policy document considers the Horn of Africa as an interconnected territory in terms of history, culture, and language, such that Ethiopia's fate relates to that of the region. Therefore, unlike previous foreign policy documents that treat neighboring countries as separate entities, that is, as being not interlinked and hence divided into allies and foes, the new document treats them as partners. It also revised the previous premise that limited the role of neighboring states to security issues only, instead, it viewed neighbors from a broader perspective that emphasizes economic growth (Quinn & Akyol, 2021).

Despite considering neighbors as partners and appreciating their economic importance, Prime Minister Abiy argues further that there are two new important envisioned approaches regarding neighboring states. The first is a major concept raised in the *Medemer* book, which states that Ethiopia's diplomatic contacts with neighboring countries should be handled by top-tier state leaders since they provide direct communication with decision makers (Abiy, 2019). This became apparent when Abiy

personally summoned all neighbors and took a direct role in every crucial regional matter. The second aspect of Abiy's plan encourages Ethiopian nationals to invest in neighboring countries to increase capital flow through people-to-people business contacts, especially from the grassroots. This was also evident in Ethiopians' new investment ventures in South Sudan's telecommunications industry and Somalia's banking, trade, and educational sectors (Eritrean Press, 2018).

A watershed moment occurred on 8 July 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy made an official state visit to Eritrea. This historic visit marked the Ethiopian Prime Minister's first visit to Eritrea since 1998. Abiy was enthusiastically welcomed by expressions that referred to him as a 'morning sunshine,' and songs/chants such as 'peace has finally prevailed,' peace, no war (Temesghen, 2018). One journalist described this euphoric atmosphere among Eritreans by saying:

... I couldn't make any tangible interviews with any one due to the overwhelming celebrations as people pulled me in their hugs and dances, and for a while, I stopped being a journalist and celebrated along with them, the news of peace and the thought of being a free young Ethiopian identical to fellow young Eritreans who referred to the day as, 'their second independence day' i.e., the first independence day being the official day of May 24, 1993 (Temesghen, 2018).

On 9th July 2018, the two countries issued a joint declaration of peace and friendship, marking the end of many years of diplomatic standoff, and agreed to normalize all economic, social, security, and political relations and reopen embassies. This declaration marked an important diplomatic and security breakthrough in the sub-region. Meanwhile, Abiy assumed leadership at the time when, on the one hand, the United States' (US) foreign policy was seemingly shifting from, 'war on terror' to leaning more on 'containing China' in the Horn region, and on the other hand, the Gulf States were

subtly replacing Ethiopia as a major player in the region. At this time, Ethiopia's national treasury was depleted, and the country was in dire economic and security distress. These developments may have contributed directly or indirectly to the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship was signed in 2018 (Eritrean Ministry of Information, 2019).

However, some analysts argue that the real reason for the easing of relations between the two states was the change in leadership from the TPLF-dominated federal government (1991 -2018) to one perceived as more inclusive under the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

The TPLF-dominated government was viewed unfavorably by Eritrea, which branded it as a hostile regime and an architect of the conflicts, given that past attempts to ease those tensions had yielded no tangible results. However, Hailemariam Desalegn (the Ethiopian Prime Minister from 2012 to 2018) argued that what Abiy Ahmed (the new Prime Minister) offered Eritrea did not differ from what he and his predecessors had previously offered, alleging that Eritrea consistently rejected these offers. Thus, based upon Desalegn's understanding, the real difference was simply that the times had changed; Eritrea waited so long for a change in leadership before accepting Ethiopia's (same) offer. This situation can then be interpreted to mean that Eritrea was more concerned with the messenger than necessarily the proposed offer (Redie, 2019).

In addition to bilateral politicking, the normalization of Ethiopian-Eritrean relations can also be read as an act consistent with the interests of powerful international players and intermediaries in the region, as the continued standoff between them threatened the stability of the Red Sea corridor, an important international shipping trade route. The US, which was dissatisfied with China's growing presence in the Horn region, where China already has a military facility and port in Djibouti, was looking for new partners to subdue China's inroads (Mosley, 2018). Therefore, the US saw the rapprochement

between Ethiopia and Eritrea as an opportunity to reassert itself in the region (Stavis-Gridneff, 2018). For instance, the cessation of hostilities, which consequently reduced Ethiopian military deployment in northern Ethiopia, was congruent with the US goal of expanding Ethiopian military personnel in Somalia in the fight against terrorism.

In addition, the EU, like the US, has been pressuring both Ethiopia and Eritrea from behind to break the impasse as a way of reducing the migration problem. Both the EU and the US believe that the *flood of refugees* from the region, especially from Eritrea, is the result of economic malaise and conflicts in which Ethiopia and Eritrea are directly or indirectly involved. As such, the peace pact between Ethiopia and Eritrea was seen as something that would considerably contribute to stability and economic growth, which in turn would be part of the solution to the refugee crisis (Stavis-Gridneff, 2018). Externally, the Arab states, as intermediate powers in the region (i.e., the Gulf sphere of influence), required rapprochement from the standpoint for their national interests resulting from the seemingly rivalry between two Arab blocs, that is, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia on one side, and Qatar and its allies on the other side (Mosley, 2018; Sintayehu, 2024).

For instance, due to the Yemen Crisis, the UAE and Saudi Arabia's main concern after the Ethiopian Eritrean normalization of relations was how to continue maintaining warm relations with Eritrea without upsetting Ethiopia. The two opposing Arab camps recognized that their competition for influence in the Horn of Africa required tactical diplomacy. Given that Ethiopia plays a strategic role in the Qatar group, pushing Ethiopia closer to Qatar amounts to committing political suicide. For the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the Ethiopian-Eritrean rapprochement worked to conceal the illegal actions of supplying arms to the Eritrean government in violation of the UN Arms embargo. Thus, their goal was to end the enmity between Ethiopia and Eritrea and create friendly relations with both in a bid to restore their credibility (Belachew, 2024).

The roles and ambitions of the US, EU, UAE, and Saudi Arabia in breaking the Ethio-Eritrean diplomatic deadlock were later followed by the US's willingness to vote in the UN Security Council to lift an arms embargo on Eritrea. The EU's immediate appreciation of rapprochement was shown by its representative in the Horn of Africa, Alexander Rondos, who applauded 'a new wind of hope' blowing across Africa and the prospect for real regional economic integration. Saudi Arabia and the UAE also played facilitative roles in the normalization of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Bavier, 2018).

For instance, in September 2018, the Ethiopian and Eritrean authorities signed another agreement in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, reaffirming their prior agreements. This 'Jeddah Peace Accord,' in which both parties pledged to stick to their earlier agreement of creating comprehensive cooperation and working together towards regional peace and security, earned Prime Minister Abiy and President Afwerki Saudi Arabia's highest honor, the Order of King Abdulaziz. Present at the signing ceremony included King Salman bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, AU Chairperson Musa Faki Mahamat, and UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. The presence of these dignitaries symbolized the international community's support for the peace process (Tesfa News, 2018).

To strengthen regional ties, Prime Minister Abiy visited Eritrea in September 2018. The purpose of this visit was to inspect the ports of Massawa and Assab, evaluate the implementation of the previous declaration terms, and hold a tripartite summit with a third leader, the president of Somalia, Abdullahi Farmaajo. The three states issued a joint declaration to foster cooperation that advances their people's goals; strengthen economic, political, security, and social ties, maintain sub-regional peace and security, and establish a joint high-level committee to coordinate their efforts within the



framework of the Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation between Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea signed in 2018.

In November 2018, Prime Minister Abiy, President Afwerki, and President Abdullahi Farmaajo of Somalia met at their second tripartite summit in Ethiopia. It was this positive spirit towards creating conditions for sustainable regional peace that spurred Ethiopia to ask the UN to lift all sanctions against Eritrea. Consequently, the UN's 9-year-old travel restrictions, arms embargo, asset freeze, and other sanctions against Eritrea were lifted in December 2018 (African News, 2020).

These efforts were subsequently followed by an award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Prime Minister Abiy in 2019 for infusing new political, security, and economic energy into the region. However, tripartite relations suffered a major setback and ceased after Somali President Farmaajo was removed from power in May 2022. Analysts argue that the failure of the tripartite alliance was because it was built on personalities, that is, the top political leaders, rather than the population, especially the grassroots. Therefore, without much support from the population, the tripartite alliance easily collapsed with the removal of the power of Somali President Farmaajo (Peace Research Facility, 2022). Aside from the setback, critics assert that a major aspect of surrounding this setback stems from the 2018 Ethiopian Eritrean pact, which was marred by transparency issues: Ordinary citizens saw the Ethiopian Eritrean pact as an elite-driven agreement without firm grassroots support.

It was, therefore, not surprising that the tripartite alliance (Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia) easily broke up because it was centered on the interests of the three politicians rather than on the interests of the masses. A prime example of this lack of inclusivity can be illustrated when Prime Minister Abiy unilaterally implemented the UN Boundary Commission's rule over the disputed border region of Badme by giving the area to Eritrea. This generated resentment from Ethiopians (Tigrayans) who lived in the

disputed area as they were not consulted, and hence, felt left out. The TPLF, which is the regional ruling party in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and shares a border with Eritrea, was not invited to be part of the peace talks between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Analysts argue that, given the strategic geo-political position of Tigray, the idea of leaving out the TPLF from the consultations remains a potent source of anger and conflict (Gebrekidan, 2020). Importantly, the failure to establish formal and legally institutionalized relationships, followed by a failure to consider the real needs of the local people, promotes mutual interest, and fully understands the interconnectedness of the interests and fates of the peoples of the region.

As of 2024, the joint commissions between Eritrea and Ethiopia have not been fully established; promised economic and political interactions have also not been fully implemented. Further, contentious border issues have not been completely resolved, and diplomatic relations have not gone as smoothly as planned. Political analysts have argued that the historically distressed relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia seems to be unfolding again. This resulted in both countries missing out on an opportunity that otherwise could have benefited them in the long term. These inconsistencies in policy formulation and implementation suggest that the tenability of the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea remains uncertain (Mohammed, 2024).

The Influence of the Tigray Conflict (2020-2022) on the Ethiopian-Eritrean Relations

The Tigray conflict (2020-2022) had a significant impact on Ethio-Eritrean relations. This two-year-long civil war began between the TPLF and the Ethiopian Federal Government, and later drew in additional parties. Initially, the Amhara regional state and later, Eritrea. Although there are different versions of the causes of the Tigray

conflict, some theories suggest that there was a cloud of war already hovering over Ethiopia from the time Prime Minister Abiy took office in 2018 (Basch, 2024).

Of particular concern to the TPLF was Prime Minister Abiy's idea of accepting and implementing the 2002 Boundary Commission's recommendation to give the Badme region (a land previously under Tigray) to Eritrea. Thus, while this gesture provided prospects of enduring peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the TPLF was gripped with the anxiety of slowly losing their political clout and hence began to steadily set the war in motion. Therefore, since 2018, these 'time bomb' politics meant that the TPLF was viewed as a 'common enemy' by both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments. In essence, however, the TPLF was fighting three forces. First, the Federal government of Ethiopia had a desire to defederalize and centralize Ethiopia (as a solution to the country's political stability) against the wishes of Tigrayan nationalists.

In this way, the government envisioned taming all rebel-prone groups. Second, the Eritrean government saw the TPLF as a long-standing threat to its assimilationist nation-building policy slogan of 'one people, one heart' in the country. Third, the Amhara nationalist military wing (the Fano rebels), with support from mainstream Amhara nationalists (the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia), claimed that they had lost their 'political hegemony' for many years. They argued that this historic oppression was due to the TPLF's led federalization of the 'old Amhara empire,' and hence saw the TPLF as a threat to their 'restorationism hope' of re-establishing a unitarist Ethiopia or at least to recover Tigray's Welkait and Raya areas which were previously under their control (Basch, 2024).

In the context of the aforementioned, the Ethiopian-Eritrean pact of 2018 can also be read as a 'war pact' or, otherwise, an opportunistic alliance that was, in part, aimed at neutralizing the TPLF due to the looming standoff between the central government of Ethiopia and Tigray regional leaders. In this political gig saw puzzle, the TPLF saw

those three group connections as a strategic siege and existential threat aimed at weakening their nationalism and, more generally, humiliating the Tigrayan people. The International Crisis Group (2022) asserted that the war was triggered by Tigray forces, who attacked the northern Ethiopian federal national army command in November 2020, alleging that they feared an impending federal military attack. Another version suggests that the war was triggered by Prime Minister Abiy's refusal to grant what some analysts call Tigray's right to hold its regional elections (due to the Covid-19 pandemic at the time) and whose results Abiy refused to acknowledge. On the question of those Tigray elections, another version suggests that holding elections against the advice of the central government was a deliberate action intended to delegitimize the government in the eyes of external observers (Mengistu, 2024).

During the Tigray conflict, Eritrea became Ethiopia's most important regional ally. Although the Ethiopian government initially denied Eritrea's involvement, it eventually became officially known that Eritrea was actively involved. The close cooperation between the two throughout the war, as well as the secrecy surrounding the details of their earlier agreements, seemed to point to the idea that their 2018 accords were nothing but 'security and political arrangements' to encircle the TPLF and neutralize its political and military capabilities.

Corroborating this hypothesis, De Waal (2020) and Manek & Omer (2020) contend that Eritrea joined the Federal Ethiopian government in the conflict due to their mutual animosity toward the TPLF. There are also reports suggesting that Somalia also covertly fought in the Tigray Conflict alongside Ethiopia (African News, 2021). The two-year conflict ended in November 2022 when the federal government and the TPLF leaders signed the Pretoria Peace Agreement of November 2022, negotiated by the AU in Pretoria, South Africa (International Crisis Group, 2022). Therefore, although the war (on face value) was fought between Ethiopia and the TPLF, the Pretoria Agreement left

out other backgrounds, yet equally key conflict actors, that is, Eritrea and the Amhara Fano rebels. This exclusion exposes the contrasts in the alliance's security strategic objectives. Abiy also wanted the war to cease to protect the Ethiopian economy from further deterioration.

However, perhaps more crucially, Prime Minister Abiy wanted to end the war to preserve his image as Laurel Nobel Laureate, given that international human rights bodies were increasingly voicing their concerns about alleged human rights abuses of his forces in Tigray (Sintayehu, 2024). Abiy's government was accused of hindering international human rights investigators from probing a shopping list of abuses by armed forces, such as sexual violence, cultural suppression, ethnic cleansing, and government complicity in ethnically motivated violence, and labeling the TPLF as a terrorist organization.

Although Prime Minister Abiy denied these allegations, his unguarded rhetoric against Tigray, coupled with the outlandish statements of his political advisors, suggests the contrary. For instance, Abiy himself is reported to have said, 'we will bury this enemy (TPLF) with our blood and bones, and the pit which will be dug for them will be very deep' (Reuters News, November 3, 2021). More incriminatingly, the Prime Minister's special advisor, Daniel Kibret's rhetoric against Tigray, left no shadow of a doubt about government complicity in human rights abuses such as targeted violence, hate speech, and utterances bordering on genocidal intent when he said:

...the TPLF is not something we can understand. We can only erase them, so they may not exist. They should be erased and removed from historical records. A person who wants to study them should not find anything about them. Maybe he can find out about them by digging into the ground (Basch, 2024).

On the whole, however, most Ethiopians welcomed the Pretoria Agreement despite some political elites' doubts about its efficacy, given that Eritrea and the Amhara

nationalists were left out of the negotiating table. Therefore, unlike Prime Minister Abiy, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki's desire for the Tigray question was for the war to continue until the TPLF was completely defeated and incapacitated to the extent that they became politically irrelevant in regional politics. So, on the one hand, although Eritrea did not openly oppose the Pretoria Agreement for fear of being labelled as a 'spoiler', it viewed the end of the war as a 'lost opportunity' that should have completely dismantled the TPLF (Sintayehu, 2024). In Addition, Eritrea saw the Tigray conflict as an additional opportunity to justify Eritrea's continued militarization of its society, which over the years was marked by the forceful conscription of young Eritreans into the military. Another policy difference that was exposed in the allies' strategy was that while Prime Minister Abiy was seeking to re-engage the US, Eritrea showed contrary security aspirations. For instance, Eritrea aligned itself with a rising China and openly supported Russia in its conflict with Ukraine (Sintayehu, 2024).

Further, the Amhara nationalists felt deceived and accused of arranging the Federal Ethiopian government of giving the TPLF to gain control over the disputed lands that were taken during the war (International Crisis Group, 2023). Critics argue that the Ethiopian-Eritrean relations are not as solid as presumed. Factors such as non-transparency of their agreements; exclusion of the local community, a failure to focus on addressing the root causes of the underlying disputes; the two leaders' apparent competition to become influential figures in the region, i.e., Prime Minister Abiy's populist disposition and President Afwerki's self-imposed position as the 'natural leader' of the Horn of Africa. In addition, their philosophical incompatibility seems apparent; for instance, Prime Minister Abiy seems to have a 'progressive inclined agenda' while Eritrea's President Afwerki comes across as a 'rigid and conservative' leader, and not to mention the inconsistent foreign policies from both sides.

President Afwerki seemed to believe that the West protected the TPLF (his main political foe) from total annihilation through the Pretoria Agreement of 2022 – a document which he alleges was arranged and drafted by the United States and only left for the signatures of the two main rivals (i.e., Ethiopia and the TPLF) (Gebreluel, 2023). It is also argued that President Afwerki has been more unsettled because the TPLF has not been dismantled and still dominates Tigrayan politics, and the relationship between Ethiopia and the West (which had been strained due to the Tigray conflict) was now normalized, and a strategic alliance forged. This frustration is further demonstrated by the fact that Eritrea continued to have its forces in parts of Tigray, a move that somewhat hampered the implementation of the Pretoria Agreement's provisions that required the TPLF disarmament to occur in tandem with the removal of all foreign forces from Tigray (ibid).

This general disgruntlement by Eritrea became more concerning and took an ideological twist when the Eritrean government started to train and equip Amhara nationalist rebels. The Amhara rebels, who were already dissatisfied with the Pretoria Agreement, began fighting the Ethiopian federal government actively in April 2023, when some Amhara regional special forces joined them, refusing to obey the federal government's command to nationalize regional paramilitaries by combining them with other Ethiopian security units (International Crisis Group, 2023). Therefore, the mutual suspicion between Ethiopia and Eritrea was heightened and exacerbated in 2023 and 2024, when Prime Minister Abiy put the matter of Ethiopia's desire for direct access to the Red Sea port to the forefront of his policy agenda.

The post-Pretoria Treaty unstable and ambiguous relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea have recently revealed their true face through diplomatic accusations against one another. Some Eritrean troops still hold the northern part of Tigray, having remained on Ethiopian soil after the conflict ended in 2022. Following the MoU, Eritrea negotiated a

security pact with Egypt and Somalia, which was largely interpreted as intended to combat Ethiopia's prospective access to the sea aspirations. Eritrea prohibited Ethiopian Airlines from operating flights to Asmara in July 2024, claiming that the airline had raised prices without cause, but Ethiopian Airlines refuted these claims. Ethiopian Airlines, a powerful symbol of the country's renewed ties, cancelled flights to Eritrea in September of 2024 (Ross, 2025).

Furthermore, an increase in tensions in the Tigray regional state in 2025 threatened to spark a conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The TPLF, which oversees Tigray's post-conflict interim government with the approval of the federal government, has split into two factions. According to reports, Eritrea is helping these TPLF dissident factions. Moreover, there have been allegations that the Eritrean government is training and equipping the Fano force.

In what appears to be a resurgence of subversive activity, Ethiopia hosted a convention of Brigade N'Hamedu (Blue Revolution Movement), an anti-Asmara regime opposition group which claims it is fighting for political change in Eritrea and offered to make any sacrifices to achieve their goal. The condition was made worse by the Pretoria Agreement's unfinished business, which includes the disarmament of the Tigray Forces and the existence of Eritrean forces in Ethiopia. In mid-February 2025, Eritrea issued an order for a nationwide military mobilization (Ross, 2025).

Since then, Ethiopia has been graduating a significant number of armed forces, and some sources within the government suggest that Ethiopia sent troops to the Eritrean border. Ethiopia worries that Eritrea may take advantage of the unrest in Tigray and team up with the Fano dissident group to launch an offensive, while Eritrea worries that, since the future of access to the sea through Somaliland and Somalia is uncertain, emboldened Abiy may attempt to take the Eritrean port of Assab. If something goes wrong within

Ethiopia, Eritrea may benefit from Ethiopia's internal unrest, while Ethiopia may benefit from the world's disillusionment with the Asmara regime's autocratic rule.

Ethiopia's Sea Access Through Somaliland as A Critical Point of Juncture: Security Implications for the Horn & Sahel Countries of Somalia, (Egypt), Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, & Chad

Ethiopian foreign policy approach with regards to the port from 1991 to 2018 had been a policy of diversifying choices and strengthening the Ethiopian economy so that neighboring countries compete with each other to utilize Ethiopia's port. After 2018, however, the issue received more attention, and a policy of establishing a naval force and having access to the sea or possessing a port that Ethiopia can administer was adopted.

The 2018 government held a position that the Nile and the Red Sea will shape Ethiopia's destiny, and these two waters will either contribute to its progress or demise.

Referring to Ethiopia's population 'tsunami' as well as historical, geographical, economic, and ethnic claims, including Ethiopia's legitimate need for access to the sea, Prime Minister Abiy requested that the unofficial bloc containing Ethiopia (by neighboring countries) be disbanded and that neighboring countries assist the state in its existential question of sea-access.

In the 'Red Sea speech' in October 2023, Prime Minister Abiy described restoring sea access as an existential issue for the growing Ethiopia and expressed Ethiopia's willingness to engage in negotiations with any state that would provide it access to the sea. Abiy emphasized the peaceful ways through federation/confederation, land exchange, and granting part of the large Ethiopian firms and projects like the GERD, Ethiopian Air Way, and Ethio-telecom. Somaliland remained mute, while other

neighboring states, primarily Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia, not only expressed their refusal to engage in conversation but also saw the statement as tactless, bold, and a challenge to their sovereignty (Badar, 2023).

As the primary priority of the state, various Ethiopian elites and politicians had proposed how Ethiopian access to the sea could be realized, and different plans were in the offing. It is argued that some politicians proposed the use of underhanded methods, such as an attempt to support and incite Afar insurgents in Eritrea to force the government to allow them a referendum. Other theories suggested the idea of sponsoring Afar insurgents in Djibouti to put pressure on the Djibouti government to reconsider Ethiopia's seaport access request. The Afar people (dominantly pastoralists) are considered one of the ancient groups of the Horn region who settled in areas mainly covering Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Eritrea. Despite their historical status, they are among the most underdeveloped and marginalized people of the region – a situation that has contributed to rebellious activities against the political authorities of the concerned states (Alemu, 2015).

The map below shows the spread of the areas inhabited by the Afar people.



Figure 3. Map showing the areas inhabited by the Afar people.

Source: www.blogalstudies.com, 2017.

Other theories regarding Ethiopia's strategies include the recognition of Somaliland in exchange for access to seaports, or to use such recognition as a leverage or bargaining chip to get (or to compel) the Republic of Somalia to provide access to its seaports. Further, these plots included the potential utilization of political movements in the western part of Somaliland's Awdal area by encouraging them to engage in successionist ploys so that they could be merged with Ethiopia. The map below shows the Awdal region in Somaliland.



Figure 4. Map showing the Awdal region in Somaliland.

Source: Ontheworldmap.com, 2021.

Another alleged plot by Ethiopia is the idea of fermenting troubles surrounding the Ras Doumeira corridor (a disputed island between the Red Sea waters of Eritrea and Djibouti), which was allegedly left purposely without being delineated by previous Ethiopian governments. The Ras Doumeira Peninsula has long been disputed between Djibouti and Eritrea, a land that both claim ownership of. Some historical records suggest that this peninsula was initially under the colonial control of French Djibouti, but later gave it to Italy, which at the time was the de facto administrator of the Eritrean territory. For Ethiopia, the dilemma here is that in 2016, it signed a defense treaty with Djibouti, which means that Ethiopia must defend Djibouti's territorial sovereignty. When the 2016 agreement was signed, Ethiopia and Eritrea had frosty relations (Maru, 2024). The map below shows the Ras Doumeira peninsula on the Red Sea.

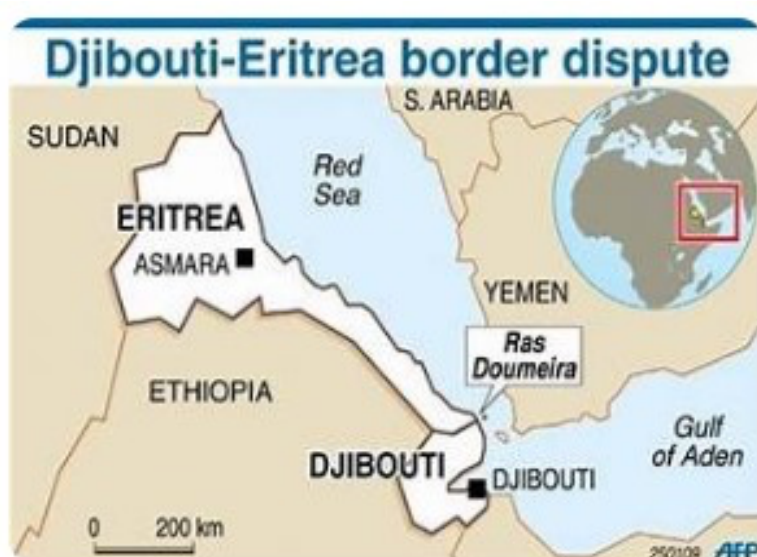


Figure 5. Map showing the Ras Doumeira peninsula.

Source: Saxafimedia.com, 2021.

Direct access to the Red Sea is critical to Ethiopia's economic growth and development. Ethiopia needs relief from dependence on Djibouti (95%) and Somalia (5%) for foreign transit trade, which has cost it \$2 million per day in transit costs and approximately \$1.5 billion per year (Hashem, 2024, p.6). Besides economic and demographic pressures, regional security concerns, and its regional leadership aspiration made Ethiopia refused to accept its landlockedness and was determined to free itself from geographical imprisonment.

In an unexpected turn of events, despite several internal and external actors' claims that Ethiopia would invade Eritrea to control Assab Port, Ethiopia took the first historical strategic step towards peacefully realizing its three-decade dream of port ownership by signing a Cooperation and Partnership Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland in January 2024. Under this agreement, Somaliland would provide Ethiopia with naval and commercial sea access (on a 50-year lease) in exchange for commercial

shareholding in Ethiopian Airlines, as well as Ethiopia's *recognition* of Somaliland as a state. The deal drew international attention as three major interests converged: Somaliland's desire for de jure recognition, Ethiopia's ambition to gain access to the sea, and Somalia's quest for respect for its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Bakonyi, 2024).

Despite the controversy surrounding this matter, this soon-to-be operationalized agreement will, technically, affect no party or country, and is viewed simply as an economic/commercial give-and-take deal that will foster regional economic integration, mutual prosperity, and promote peace and security. The issue of reconsidering Somaliland's recognition (a matter that has the potential to open a Pandora's box in the region) is viewed through the lens of self-determination. Ethiopia's seemingly unrevoked permanent de jure recognition of Somaliland stems way back in 1960, when Somaliland was a recognized state internationally (though only for a brief period) before it joined Somalia. Following the state implosion of Somalia in 1991, Somaliland decided to secede from an insurgency-prone state but has so far not been fully recognized by the international community (Maru, 2024). The map below shows the location of Somaliland within the Republic of Somalia.

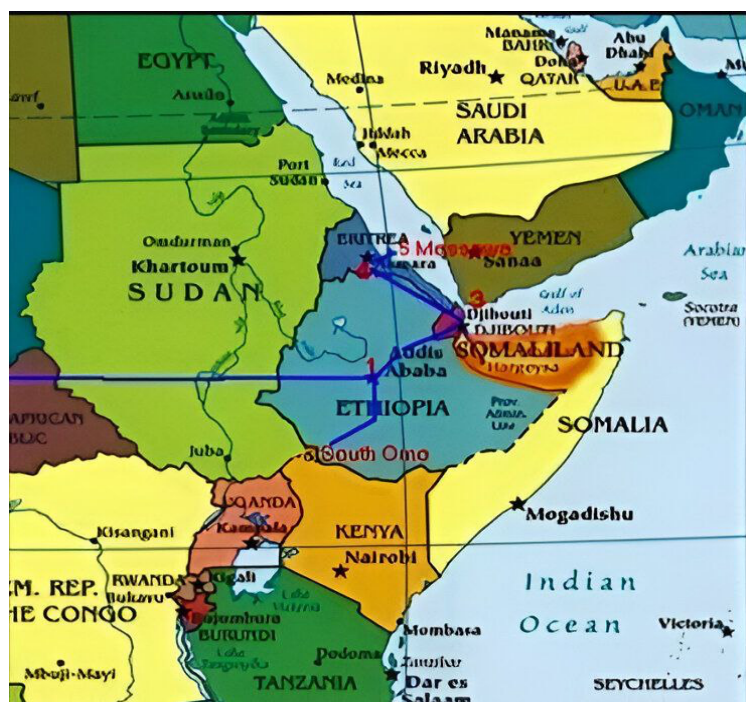


Figure 6. The geographical location of Somaliland within the Republic of Somalia.

Source: www.afrodigg.com/news.php, 2008.

Ethiopia's ambition to secure a seaport through Somaliland has ignited tensions that have brought Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Egypt closer. This was evidenced by the recent treaty signed in Asmara city by Eritrea, Egypt, and Somalia, where they pledged their support and respect for the territorial sovereignty of others. This was read as a direct rebuke of Ethiopia's recent treaty of sea access with Somaliland (Maru, 2024).

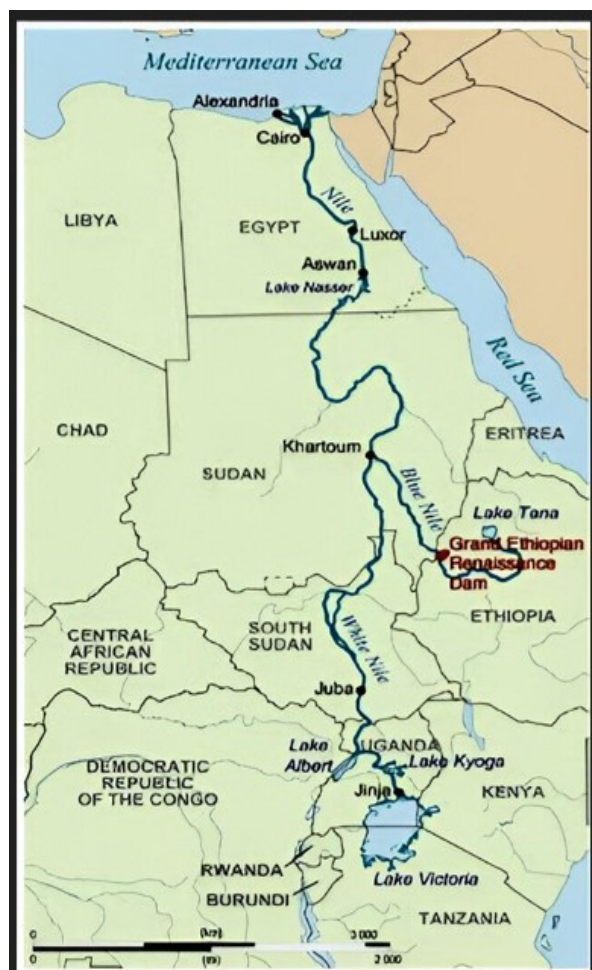
Somalia considers the treaty between Ethiopia and Somaliland a breach of its sovereign right of control over Somaliland, which is considered to be part of the Republic of Somalia. Somalia argues that this is an act of aggression that reserves the right to defend itself.

Although Somalia has no real power over Somaliland, opposition to Ethiopia's de facto recognition of Somaliland has also been shown by other actors. For instance, the US and Turkey have long invested in efforts to revamp the state of Somalia, such as funding

social programs and training Somali Special Forces as part of counter-terrorism efforts. Turkey is keen to defend Somalia as it intends to explore investment possibilities in natural gas exploits and the ambition to set up a rocket testing site (Donelli, 2024). As such, a full-scale confrontation between Somalia and Ethiopia (though unlikely) would jeopardize efforts to rebuild a united Somalia. In addition, Ethiopia risks political isolation, as key international actors in Horn politics, such as the US, the EU, the AU, and the Arab League, all support Somalia's sovereignty rights. Somalia announced that 3000 Ethiopian troops who are part of the current AU mission to Somalia should leave by the end of 2024. In addition, all other Ethiopian troops stationed in various locations in Somalia on a bilateral agreement to fight Al Shabaab militants will also be required to leave. These hostile developments may compound the already porous security situation in Somalia, whereby an increasingly weakening central government becomes the de facto strength for Al Shabaab militants and piracy (Bayeh, 2024).

In this political matrix, Egypt, a longtime rival of Ethiopia over the Nile River grievance (of reduced water flow) resulting from Ethiopia's construction of the GERD, a project that Egypt considers a breach of its interests and rights as a downstream country, has exploited the current poor relations between Ethiopia and Somalia to get closer to Somalia. For Egypt, the Nile River is the country's mainstay of agricultural economy. Thus, Egypt is using this opportunity not only to increase its military presence in the region but also to offer veiled support to opposition and secessionist nationalist movements in Ethiopia. For instance, following its defense agreement with Somalia, Egypt will send troops to Somalia as part of a bilateral military agreement.

In addition, Egypt will deploy at least 5000 troops as part of the AU mission in Somalia to replace Ethiopian forces. Given that previously, Ethiopia was the key player in the AU missions in Somalia, Egypt's new *prominent* role in Somalia is a smack in the face



Source: www.researchgate.net, 2024.

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strengthen rebel factions both within Ethiopia and Somalia, who see this standoff as an opportunity to engage in more clandestine activities, especially Ethiopia's porous borders with neighbors (BBC News, August 30, 2024).

For Eritrea, Ethiopia's desire for access to the sea was interpreted as a national security threat, which perceived Ethiopia as attempting to militarily seize any seaport it deemed would optimize its national interests, which increased Eritrea's suspicion. Although the sea-access memorandum of understanding between Ethiopia and Somalia clarified that the agreement was purely for commercial purposes, the contradicting Eritrean interpretations and overall suspicions towards Ethiopia created a picture that Ethiopia was concealing its real intentions. This shows that other underlying sources of discontent remained. For instance, Eritrea seems to have a historical anti-Ethiopian development and anti-Ethiopian nationalist disposition.

Eritrea's suspicion of Ethiopia's port agreement with Somaliland should not be read simply as idle speculation on the part of Eritrea. For instance, in 2022, Eritrea fell out of Ethiopia following the Pretoria Agreement of 2022 (between Ethiopia and the TPLF), which ended the Tigray Conflict – a war in which Eritrea actively participated but was (deliberately) not included in the negotiations of the Pretoria Agreement. Therefore, the culmination of such suspicious events has led to deteriorating relations, but the current standoff comes directly from Ethiopia's port sea ambitions. Eritrea argues that these port ambitions themselves were presented in a chauvinist way, whereby Ethiopia presented those ideas with a veiled warning to neighbors that a failure to secure a seaport could lead to conflicts.

Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia argue that they will not entertain control of their seaports by Ethiopia through arm-twisting tactics. Eritrea's main concern was that until 1993, its Red Sea coastline had been part of the Ethiopian state and was only taken away from Ethiopia due to a protracted war that ended with the 1993 independence referendum. It

can be argued that such seemingly hardline political stances by neighbors (Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia) have pushed Ethiopia to sign an access seaport agreement with Somaliland (The Global Herald, 2024; Bakonyi, 2024; Maru, 2024).

However, political analysts have argued that a renewed conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is unlikely. For Eritrea, the 2018 comprehensive peace pact with Ethiopia may have worked to repress any doubts it might have had towards Ethiopia. Significantly, Eritrea may have turned a blind eye on Ethiopia's Red Sea ambitions to focus on the much more important task of consolidating its ties so that together, they could contain and politically crush the TPLF, a longtime foe of Eritrea.

Moreover, Eritrea is not currently able to withstand any major conflicts. While its international stature has increased considerably, its economy is still small and delicate, and its army is still not very powerful. More crucially, any major conflict could potentially leave Eritrea internationally isolated. In addition, a return to rivalry would be damaging for the entire region that is already volatile, as it might work as a stimulus for proxy wars and increase the chances of jihadist expanding their network (Woldemariam, 2023).

For Djibouti, the idea of Ethiopia bypassing it and signing a seaport treaty with Somaliland is viewed as having serious economic ramifications because currently, 95% of Ethiopia's overseas trade goes through the Djibouti ports. This heavy reliance on Djibouti might explain why Ethiopia has been exploring alternative options (Hashem, 2024). The Somaliland port treaty will certainly reduce Djibouti's annual revenues and consequently affect its GDP growth. Furthermore, China has invested in the Djibouti ports to enhance its trade; for instance, it is actively supporting the railway network that runs from Djibouti to Ethiopia.

Chinese investments in Djibouti are part of a larger project in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Analyzed from a broader political perspective, Djibouti sees these

Ethiopian port maneuvers as a project that not only undermines its national interests but also presents more ominous motives at play (Bakonyi, 2024).

In a region that is already volatile with other security challenges, any rift between Ethiopia and Eritrea could worsen the situation. For instance, in the current civil war in Sudan, two rival armies, one led by General Abdel Burhan, the leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces, and the other faction led by General Mohamed Hemedti, the leader of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) who are at loggerheads. Both camps have attracted sympathy from various regional actors based on the actors' geopolitical and economic interests rather than Sudan's interests. General Burhan receives support from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, and Iran, while his rival, General Hemedti, is supported by the UAE, Libya, and Chad. These different support avenues could be exploited by Jihadist militants to heighten tensions, both in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa regions (Lewis, 2024).

Sudan is surrounded by major Sahel arms-trafficking hubs where weapons, especially small and light weapons, are smuggled through Libya, Chad, and the Central African Republic. Chad seems to be the central hub given its close ties to the Sudanese faction leader, General Hemedti, as well as to the UAE. From Sudan, gold is smuggled to the UAE by the RSF forces, who finance their war errands through this illicit gold trade. The UAE seems to be most invested in the war and sustains Sudanese war supplies mainly through proxies, and in violation of the UN embargo against Sudan. For instance, the UAE has funded the construction of a field/military hospital in Chad, apparently supporting RSF war victims (Dudley, 2023).

The porousness of these areas makes them potential havens for other lawless vices such as human trafficking, extortion, and money laundering. These developments do not work in the interest of Ethiopia if it wants to be considered a regional power. Also, Ethiopia does not seem to have fully resolved its dispute with Sudan over the al-Fashaga border

area, - a territory that Sudan claims but is also inhabited by Ethiopian farmers who historically had settled there. To add salt to an injury, Sudan and Egypt align against Ethiopia over the GERD project, both of which are threats to the sustainability of frugal farming along the Nile River banks in their countries (Darwich, 2024). The map below shows the controversial al-Fashaga border area.

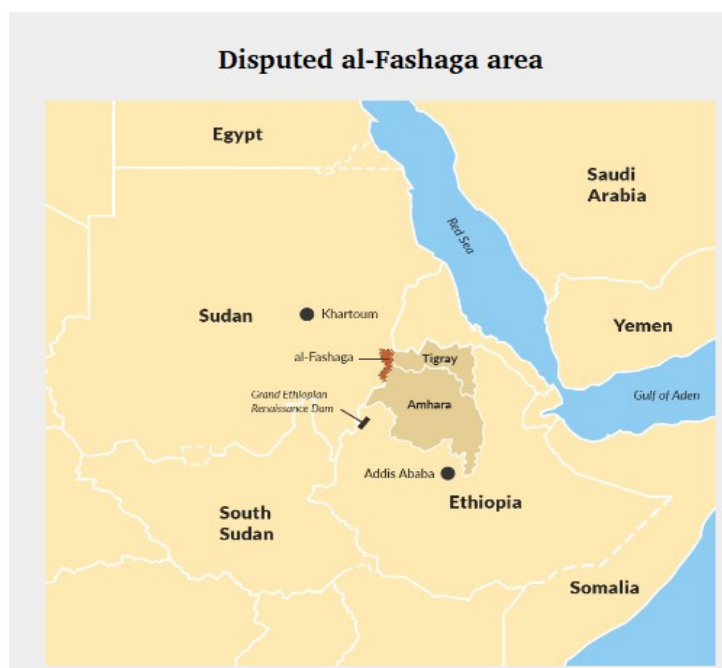


Figure 8. The al-Fashaga border area.

Source: Institute for Security Studies, 2021.

Analysis of Why Eritrea's Supposed Security Concerns are Overstated

Eritrea is known for being a controversial state, or otherwise a pariah state with totalitarian policies, and some analysts have even compared its political aloofness and unpredictability in international affairs to that of North Korea (Gebrewahd, 2017). Eritrea seems engulfed in the paranoia of a belief in encountering regional rebel-sponsored groups that it believes aim to destroy the Eritrean state. But an analysis based

on the theories that propose to account for insurrectionist activities would find that Eritrea's security threat concerns, on the whole, are neither here nor there. Eritrea's main weakness, which is also the main country's threat, is its poor economy, not necessarily the threat of losing its sovereignty. Critics argue that while the sovereignty argument by Eritrean regime supporters cannot simply be dismissed as idle speculation, the regime has been using manipulative tactics to divert attention from its poor economic performance to exaggerate its security threats with neighbors, especially Ethiopia. But strong supporters of the Eritrean sovereignty position (including many of Eritrea's older diaspora generation) insist that the independence of Eritrea is paramount to sustain manageable relations with other states (Hirt, 2021).

Political analysts such as Gebremariam & Hussien (2025) who support the regime's policies argue that the stances of the government need to be assessed on their own merits and contexts. For instance, decades of Eritrea's arduous war of independence and oppression by Ethiopia led to the cultivation of a regime culture that is nationalistically obsessed and eventually paved the way for the creation of a totalitarian state. To ensure further security, the state introduced compulsory national military service for school leavers. The government defends this policy, arguing that it works as a buffer against possible foreign intrusion. The overall gist of those who support the Eritrean government is that, despite the economic and political challenges facing Eritrea, the solutions to resolving those issues should be internally driven. Imposing solutions from outside is a disastrous path to take, as the examples of intervention elsewhere have proven, such as the Libyan intervention in 2011 by Western powers, and not to mention the disastrous results of the 2003 Iraqi intervention.

These examples show how external interference can aggravate tensions and plunge a country into chaos. For Gebremariam & Hussien (2025), any country that hopes to develop through external intervention mechanisms has a doomed future. Also, Eritrea's

strategic position on the Red Sea corridor makes it susceptible to geopolitical mudslinging as different regional and international actors jostle for influence over the seaports and trade routes. Further, many years of UN sanctions imposed on Eritrea seem only to have worked to entrench Eritrea's totalitarian policies that the government says are aimed at safeguarding its sovereignty, even though such policies end up creating internal tensions.

Furthermore, the continued Western support of Ethiopia has, over time, heightened Eritrea's nationalist disposition. For Eritrea, the only sustainable way forward is to embark upon reforms which are internally led by Eritreans themselves. In this way, Eritreans will be addressing their local challenges while at the same time preserving their sovereignty. For the West, they must embark upon mechanisms of constructive engagement and respect for Eritrea's sovereignty as a step that would foster trust among stakeholders. Most certainly, sanctions do not produce meaningful headway because, in the end, they only hurt vulnerable citizens, and not regime elites.

However, political observers such as Rubin (2025) who do not support Eritrea's policies argue that the Eritrean regime has made fundamental errors: Instead of ending oppression to concentrate on economic development, the regime engaged in nationalist policies such as the compulsory national service recruitment, otherwise military conscription, of mainly young school people. This policy has become a source of public frustration, especially among the youth who see it as an attempt to limit their human potential in other fields by confining them to the military option. More crucially, Eritrea's centralized economic policies limit the attraction of FDI and private sector growth prospects. As a result of the stiffened, repressive, and poor economic policies, many young Eritreans have fled the country and have become refugees in the West. Locally, fundamental freedoms have been severely stifled.

Thus, these rigid policies, which seem driven by a paranoia of inventing imaginary enemies, are counterproductive and have, over time, alienated the very people (young people) they set out to attract. Consequently, the regime has become ‘specialized’ in devising mechanisms to garner support through lawfare, coercion, and repression as key anchors of national stability.

Hirt (2021) observes that these tactics have been supplemented by the propaganda of the martyrs of the liberation struggle, who portray Eritrea’s independence as being under threat due to the betrayal tactics of foreign and regional powers. In 2024, for instance, Freedom House ranked Eritrea on a considerably low index margin alongside North Korea on the world freedom ranking (Rubin, 2025). President Isaias, who has been in power for more than three decades, is deeply entrenched and personalist, and he serves as the de facto head of state, military, judiciary, and economy.

Since its foundation, this totalitarian government has maintained a negative attitude towards Ethiopia. This makes the likelihood of the continuation of the enmity between the two extremely high as long as that system is in power. For Eritrea to be transformed, it will need structural reforms and diversification programs/policies that are not only inclusive, but also those that will attract both local and foreign investments.

Conclusion

From 2018 to the present, the political relations and economic dynamics between Ethiopia and Eritrea have improved considerably, given their hostile background. While some describe the post-2018 Ethiopian Eritrean connections as a return to an era of peace, developments during this time do not necessarily support this proposition. The watershed in 2018 seems to have been fading. Recently, both have publicly blamed each other for subversive activities, as Ethiopia held an anti-Eritrean regime force meeting while Eritrea supports the rebel Fano and TPLF’s dissident factions.

Eritrea's worry that Ethiopia might attack it for access to the sea or the port, along with Ethiopia's belief that Eritrea's active involvement in Ethiopia's domestic security matters will jeopardize Ethiopia's national security and the power of the current government, has brought the two countries to the brink of war.

Ethiopian-Eritrean relations have been greatly influenced by broader regional security and political characteristics. Taking lessons from history, prioritizing the demands of the population, and comprehending how both nations' fates are intertwined can provide the necessary groundwork for both countries to transform their relations. For instance, if Ethiopia is to achieve its foreign policy aim of getting access to the Red Sea and remaining at peace with neighbors, it should do so peacefully and diplomatically by using its economic, social, security, military, and geopolitical leverage.

By signing a treaty with Somaliland, Ethiopia is treading in murky waters because neither regional states nor major world powers have recognized Somaliland as a sovereign state. The potential destabilizing presence of Egypt in Somalia, arising from the Ethiopia-Somaliland treaty and the GERD grievance, could have far-reaching repercussions for the security of the region. On the other hand, Egypt could calm water by channeling its GERD grievances against Ethiopia through formal negotiating channels, such as using the AU and the UN. Ethiopia's posturing around the question of seaport access has meant that Eritrea has a fathomable reason to be wary of those ambitions, particularly the restorationist impulse in which those sentiments are perceived, given that from around 1952 to 1991, Eritrea and its seaports had been part of the Ethiopian state. These fluctuating relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea imply that the tenability of their relations hangs by a thread.

At this moment, Ethiopia could not afford to have a bad reputation, given that not long ago, it faced condemnation from the international community for its alleged mass atrocities and war crimes during the Tigray Conflict. Further, the international

community has noted the concern that the Ethiopian government tends to resort to heavy-handedness in responding to dissent from opposition groups. These concerns have negatively impacted Ethiopia's standing on the international stage. Paradoxically, the alleged fragrant human rights abuses occurred on the watch of Prime Minister Abiy, a Nobel Peace Prize winner. The contradiction could not be starker.

Ethiopia's foreign policy orientation seems to transition from idealism (norms and morality) to realism (national interest) to systematically dissolve the informal coalition of neighboring countries, which aimed at keeping Ethiopia under *geographical imprisonment*. Despite previous hopes of projecting unified positions on international matters, Ethiopia and Eritrea are pursuing different ideological goals. For instance, while Ethiopia seems to be leaning towards the US, Eritrea is pursuing a balance of power politics by aligning itself with Russia.

However, recent developments in which Ethiopia has joined the BRICS may reassure Eritrea that Ethiopia has no choice but to sail towards Russia and China. Furthermore, the seemingly shadowy but otherwise potential relationship between Eritrea and the anti-Ethiopian states and groups such as Somalia, the Amhara Fano rebels of Ethiopia, and the dissident faction of the TPLF could pose considerable odds to the stability of Ethiopia, which is prone to internal rebellion.

Thus, the differences in ideological and strategic interests can be interpreted as meaning that both can exploit their political leverage and use proxies to achieve narrow political ends. The security situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea remains unstable, with the potential for renewed skirmishes. The Tigray conflict, apart from tarnishing Ethiopia's image, also caused long-term social and economic challenges for the country. Mechanisms of how to end the war altered the nature of the Ethiopian-Eritrean relationship, as Eritrea was left out of the negotiating table despite being an active participant in the war. This act infuriated Eritrea.

Therefore, the initial 2018 euphoria, if not utopian optimism, began to fade before it could take root, as Ethiopian actions and diplomacy became more unpredictable, less cohesive, and personalized. Even though the Federal government is responsible for negotiating with the Eritrean government, the absence of active involvement of the locals at the grassroots level, including ignoring the TPLF from the policy normalization processes, began to harm Ethiopian Eritrean ties. For instance, the geo-political position of the TPLF should not be underestimated in the search for sustainable peace and security between Ethiopia and Eritrea, given that the TPLF was until 2018 a dominant political power that had overthrown the Derg regime in 1991. Despite their ideological and geo-strategic differences, Ethiopia and Eritrea cannot afford a full-scale fallout because, although Ethiopia still has military prowess, its current primary focus is to rebuild its struggling economy.

On the other hand, Eritrea is militarily in no position to engage in a full-scale war due to inadequate military capability and a small economy. A major security concern, which on face value might be overlooked, lies in what appears to be an increase in the number of anti-Ethiopian sentiments both within the region and beyond. For instance, domestic and regional anti-Ethiopian rebel groups could exploit this unstable situation and use their frustration to bandwagon with different actors, including the Sahel faction rebels such as the Sudanese RSF, a wealthy insurgent group that has syndicate ties with the UAE, Chad, the Central African Republic, and war-torn Libya.

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