

The River and the Robe: The Nile, Orthodoxy, and the Strategic Balance between Ethiopia and Egypt



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About us:

Founded in 2021, Horn Review is a premier research and publication think-tank dedicated to exploring and amplifying African voices with a goal of interlinking subject matter experts, practitioners, and academics from Ethiopia, the Horn Region, and the African continent with the broader public. With a stated mission of Africa for Africans, Horn Review aims to amplify and mainstream uniquely African ideas and perspectives on sociopolitical, economic, and geostrategic issues relevant to the continent. Horn Review aims to connect African thinkers, practitioners, and policymakers with their respective communities to create greater synergy and a people-centered discourse on African matters.



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Editor's Note

Horn Review Magazine – 17th Edition

Dear Readers,

It is with great pleasure that we present the 17th edition of *Horn Review Magazine*, an assemblage dedicated to the rigorous interrogation of the Horn of Africa's evolving geopolitical tapestry. This edition endeavors to synthesize historical inquiry, strategic analysis, and normative foresight to elucidate the region's complex and often contested realities.

In the lead article, "*The River and the Robe: The Nile, Orthodoxy, and the Strategic Balance between Ethiopia and Egypt*," we revisit the protracted and multifaceted interrelation between Ethiopia and Egypt. The piece intricately dissects the religious, historical, and strategic substrata underpinning their enduring rivalry - particularly vis-à-vis the Nile and the contentious Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam - while positing avenues for equitable diplomacy and sustained regional integration.

Dr. Abdi Zenebe's incisive contribution, "*Mapping Out Spoilers in Ethiopia's Political and Security Landscape: Motives and Management*," applies Stedman's typology to delineate the heterogeneous actors - ranging from insurgent factions to diaspora influencers - whose disruptive capacities are magnified through transnational digital networks. The analysis further interrogates state responses since 2018, advocating for ethically grounded, contextually nuanced frameworks essential for durable peacebuilding.

"*Emerging Geometries of Power and Multilateral Norms: The UN's New Face in the Horn of Africa*" critically examines the geopolitical significance of Guang Cong's historic appointment as the first Chinese UN Special Envoy to the Horn. This paradigmatic shift signifies China's transition from peripheral actor to central architect within multilateral diplomacy, compelling a reevaluation of regional peace initiatives and the normative contestations shaping international order.

The geopolitical intricacies post-Ankara Declaration are deftly unpacked in "*Fragile Alignments and Maritime Stakes: The Horn's Unsettled Equilibrium*," which scrutinizes the tripartite nexus of Egypt, Eritrea, and Somalia alongside the tentative rapprochement between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa. The analysis foregrounds the maritime and security ramifications of these fluid alliances within an increasingly contested regional milieu.

Lastly, "*Reflections on Israel-Ethiopia Relations: A Historic and Strategic Bond*" traverses the longue durée of bilateral relations - from ancient biblical narratives through Cold War alignments - to contemporary strategic partnerships. The article foregrounds the Beta Israel community's pivotal role and interrogates the broader African geopolitical context that shapes and is shaped by the Israeli-Palestinian discourse.

We invite our erudite readership to engage deeply with the thematic explorations herein, envisaging this compendium not merely as a repository of knowledge but as a catalyst for critical discourse on the Horn of Africa's future trajectories.

Blen Mamo
Executive Director & Editor-In-Chief
Horn Review



The River and the Robe: The Nile, Orthodoxy, and the Strategic Balance between Ethiopia and Egypt

By Blen Mamo & Tsega'ab Amare

For over a millennia, the histories of Ethiopia and Egypt - two ancient and enduring civilizations - have been intimately entwined by two powerful and sacred forces: the Nile River and the Orthodox Christian faith. Long before the advent of modern states or international diplomacy, these societies were already engaging in sophisticated cross-border interactions - mediated through water rights, spiritual hierarchies, and imperial correspondence. At the heart of this engagement lay a delicate, sometimes fraught interplay between natural endowment and religious authority.

Ethiopia, as the source of approximately 86% of the Nile waters reaching Egypt, has long considered the river not only an ecological asset but a foundational pillar of national development (Kendie, 1999). Egypt, highly reliant on the Nile for its survival, has traditionally viewed any upstream activity with concern. This hydro-political dynamic has been a recurring motif in their relations. Yet, far from an aggressive pursuit of dominance, Ethiopia's position has historically reflected a reasoned insistence on sovereignty, balance, and equitable resource sharing.

Conversely, Egypt's influence over the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) for more than 1,600 years -

through the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria - constituted a long-standing spiritual asymmetry that limited Ethiopia's ecclesiastical independence until the mid-20th century (Erlich, 2000). This dual dynamic - geographic and ecclesiastical - shaped a relationship defined by mutual dependency, occasional tension, and gradual rebalancing.

Ethiopia's Nile Leverage: Sovereignty, Not Sabotage

Ethiopia's awareness of its hydrological importance dates back to antiquity. In the medieval era, emperors such as Amde-Tsion in the 14th century alluded to their capacity to influence the Nile's flow - not as an act of aggression, but as a diplomatic signal during moments of religious or political strain, particularly when the appointment of the Abuna by Alexandria was delayed or Coptic Christians were facing persecution in Egypt (Kendie, 1999). These statements, while rhetorically potent, were symbolic - underscoring Ethiopia's agency in matters affecting its religious and regional interests. In the modern period, this symbolic power matured into policy-oriented diplomacy. The 1902 Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty - negotiated under imperial pressures - placed restrictions on Nile development, but was later contested by Ethiopia as an unfair colonial legacy (Feleke, 2020).

Repeated delays in granting foreign concessions around Lake Tana further illustrated Ethiopia's principled stance: development must serve national priorities, not external dictates.

This evolution culminated in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a generational project reflecting Ethiopia's long-standing desire to harness its natural resources for sustainable development. Contrary to alarmist portrayals, GERD has been framed by Ethiopian authorities as a regional asset - designed to generate electricity, reduce flooding, and promote shared prosperity - without causing significant harm to downstream nations. By emphasizing technical transparency and multilateral dialogue, Ethiopia has presented itself as a rational actor navigating complex historical constraints with maturity and foresight.

Egypt's Ecclesiastical Lever: Spiritual Authority as Soft Power

While Ethiopia's hydrological position afforded symbolic leverage, Egypt historically exercised a more consistent form of influence: ecclesiastical oversight. From the 4th century until 1959, the head of the Ethiopian Church - the Abuna - was appointed by the Coptic Patriarch in Alexandria. This arrangement, although rooted in shared theological heritage, effectively subordinated the EOTC to external control (Erlich, 2000). A key justification for this dependency was a purported canon from the Council of Nicaea prohibiting Ethiopia from appointing its own archbishop - an assertion now debunked by modern scholarship (Nine Saints Ethiopian Orthodox Monastery, n.d.). While this narrative served to legitimize Alexandria's role for centuries, it also constrained the development of a fully autonomous ecclesiastical leadership aligned with Ethiopia's evolving national identity and spiritual culture.

The appointment process offered Egypt an indirect channel of influence - enabling the potential shaping of church leadership, messaging, and even political attitudes. While there is little evidence of overt interference, the structural dependency itself represented a limitation on Ethiopia's sovereignty. Calls for ecclesiastical self-determination thus became intertwined with broader nationalist aspirations, especially in the 20th century.

Strategic Realignment: Diplomacy of Sovereignty in the 20th Century

The interplay between these dual levers - hydrology and theology - came to a head in the 20th century as Ethiopia asserted a more independent course. Under Emperor Haile Selassie, growing calls for ecclesiastical autonomy converged with efforts to reclaim full control over water development and national planning (TIME, 1944). These movements were driven not by hostility, but by a maturing state seeking to consolidate its institutional sovereignty.

Egypt, meanwhile, was entering a period of transformative ambition under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser's initiatives, such as the Aswan High Dam and his broader pan-Arabist project, introduced new strategic dynamics into the region - raising Ethiopia's concerns about water rights, regional influence, and ideological competition (Omer, 2024). Within this complex landscape, the decision by Patriarch Kyrillos VI to grant autocephaly to the EOTC in 1959 was a landmark moment - an acknowledgment of Ethiopia's ecclesiastical maturity and a diplomatic recalibration by Cairo. For Ethiopia, the achievement was historic. Ecclesiastical independence was not a repudiation of shared faith, but rather a restoration of spiritual sovereignty - affirming the nation's distinct theological identity and aligning the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church more closely with national development & security goals, particularly given the Church's considerable socio-political influence at the time. This act also symbolized Ethiopia's broader path: a sovereign nation navigating external pressures through negotiation, not confrontation.

A Rational Road Forward: Equitable Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation

Today, Ethiopia's strategy in the Nile Basin remains anchored in principles of fairness, multilateralism, and transparency. The construction and operation of the GERD, for example, have been accompanied by detailed environmental assessments, public communications, and participation in regional forums. Far from undermining regional stability, Ethiopia has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to a negotiated settlement that balances upstream rights with downstream concerns.

Moving forward, Ethiopia must continue to protect its sovereignty while fostering cooperative regional ties. This includes strengthening institutions against undue influence, building technical expertise in water diplomacy, and expanding partnerships across Africa and beyond. Engagement with the African Union, IGAD, and the international community must be proactive, principled, and grounded in data-driven, forward-looking policies. Moreover, Ethiopia's religious and cultural diplomacy should play a complementary role. The EOTC - now fully independent - can serve as a bridge, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding between historically linked peoples. Cultural exchanges, theological collaboration, and people-to-people initiatives offer pathways to reconciliation and shared identity rooted not in subordination, but in mutual respect.

Conclusion: Sacred History, Shared Future

The story of Ethiopia and Egypt - bound by the sacred waters of the Nile and the shared robes of Christian orthodoxy - is not merely a chronicle of rivalry or coercion. It is a testament to the enduring power of geography and faith in shaping international relations. It reveals how symbols can become instruments of statecraft, and how diplomacy can be forged not only in palaces but also from pulpits. Ethiopia's path has long been marked by a principled pursuit of sovereignty, equity, and regional peace. Whether in hydropolitics or ecclesiastical independence, the rational assertion of national agency underscores a timeless truth: that in the complex theatre of international affairs, dignity and dialogue must remain the foundation of any lasting solution. Indeed, the long arc of Ethiopian-Egyptian relations offers a rare case study in how natural and metaphysical forces - rivers and robes, hydrology and hierarchy - can serve as tools of both oppression and emancipation. These forces have shaped not only diplomatic tactics and power dynamics but also national identity, religious legitimacy, and regional order.

In this enduring contest, Ethiopia's strategic lesson is clear: all instruments of power - whether flowing waters or sacred traditions - must be understood, mastered, and, when necessary, recalibrated. The ability to navigate such complex, multidimensional relationships with clarity, dignity, and strategic foresight will shape not only Ethiopia's trajectory, but also the broader equilibrium of Northeast Africa.

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Mapping Spoilers in Ethiopia's Political and Security Landscape: Motives and Management

By Abdi Zenebe (PHD), Deputy Executive Director, Institute of Foreign Affairs

Democratic transitions are inherently complex and challenging endeavors, marked by the need to accommodate diverse and often competing interests. Among the most significant obstacles are spoilers - actors who actively undermine peace or democratic processes - widely regarded as “the greatest source of risk” to countries attempting to build consolidated democracies and lasting peace (Stedman, 1997). Since the mid-1990s, the concept of spoilers has gained traction among international organizations and scholars. However, much of the discourse has focused on strengthening external actors’ capacities to manage spoilers, especially in the Global South. The literature addressing the role of local state capacity in managing spoilers during political transitions or dialogues, such as the work of Nilsson and Kovacs (2021), remains relatively limited and mainly emphasizes the diverse nature of spoilers and the challenges of their management. The behavior and influence of spoilers have evolved significantly alongside advancements in communication technologies. Social media, the internet, and emerging tools like generative AI enable spoilers to operate with increased anonymity, rapidly disseminate disinformation, and influence conflicts remotely - even from abroad. This is particularly alarming for spoilers who hold foreign passports, as they exploit international mobility and jurisdictional protections to evade local accountability while coordinating destabilizing activities through global networks.

Furthermore, spoilers today are not confined to identifiable political entities; covert actors posing as journalists, researchers, or activists also seek to undermine democratic processes and national dialogues.

To better understand this multifaceted phenomenon, this analysis explores the Ethiopian government’s approach since 2018 to managing spoilers both within and beyond its borders. It begins by defining and mapping spoilers in Ethiopia using Stedman’s (1997) typology, then examines their underlying motives before proposing both traditional and innovative strategies for their management, with a particular focus on internally driven approaches. The analysis further contextualizes spoilers within broader ethnic dynamics, power asymmetries, regional influences, and the evolving digital ecosystem, while reflecting on the ethical dilemmas and fluidity inherent in spoiler behavior.

Defining and Mapping Spoilers in Ethiopia

Stedman’s (1997) typology - categorizing spoilers as limited, greedy, or total - provides a foundational framework for understanding spoilers within Ethiopia’s complex political and security environment. Limited spoilers pursue specific, negotiable goals, often manageable through recognition or power-sharing arrangements.

Greedy spoilers adjust their demands opportunistically according to political momentum, while total spoilers exhibit uncompromising, often pathological tendencies, seeking to dominate or destroy opposing groups (Stedman, 1997, pp. 10 - 11). However, it is important to recognize that spoiler identities and behaviors are neither static nor easily pigeonholed. Actors may shift between categories as contexts change, illustrating the fluidity of spoiler roles. Moreover, spoilers operate within a fragmented governance landscape marked by contested sovereignty and competing centers of power, a hallmark of Ethiopia's hybrid political order. This fragmentation complicates traditional conflict management approaches and requires adaptive strategies sensitive to local dynamics.

In the Ethiopian context, spoilers are individuals, groups, or factions that actively disrupt peace and democratic transitions through violence, incitement, insurrection, and misinformation disseminated by both traditional and digital media. These actors, whether locally based or operating from abroad, undermine the government's open-door policy and repeated calls for inclusive dialogue, such as those championed by the National Dialogue Commission (NDC). Their motivations intertwine with ethnonationalist grievances, historical narratives of marginalization, and struggles over resource control, further complicating peace efforts.

Key Spoilers in Ethiopia

Applying Stedman's framework reveals a diverse array of spoilers active in Ethiopia's political and security arena as of mid-2025. Among armed groups, certain designated terrorist organizations display total spoiler characteristics by rejecting peace offers and national dialogue initiatives while seeking ethnic or regional dominance through uncompromising means. These groups' actions are driven not only by political aims but also by deeper identity-based fears and historical grievances, weaponizing ethnicity to mobilize followers and justify exclusionary agendas. Others, which formerly exhibited total spoiler behavior, have shifted somewhat following military setbacks and peace agreements but remain greedy spoilers, manipulating political openings to retain regional power and autonomy. Fragmented militias in regions like Amhara, lacking centralized leadership yet sharing ethnonationalist goals, also fit the total spoiler profile.

Their decentralized nature and refusal to engage in dialogue reflect a broader resistance to state authority and pluralism. In the political realm, some diaspora-based actors - often influential on digital platforms - epitomize greedy spoiler behavior. These individuals exploit crises to bolster their own political capital and influence from abroad, publicly criticizing dialogue processes despite government invitations to participate. Their relative safety outside Ethiopia's jurisdiction allows them to sustain oppositional campaigns without facing immediate consequences, while their activities intersect with transnational networks and foreign political landscapes. Domestically, other political figures exhibit a spectrum of spoiler behavior. Some display limited spoiler tendencies, engaging in negotiation and seeking political relevance through inclusion in national processes. Others, more opportunistic, escalate tensions to regain lost influence, adjusting their tactics dynamically according to the evolving political context. Notably, spoiler influence is deeply affected by power asymmetries. The state's institutional weaknesses, legitimacy crises, and governance gaps create openings that spoilers exploit. Thus, spoiler behavior is both a cause and a symptom of broader structural vulnerabilities.

The Evolving Nature of Spoilers: Communication Tools and Transnational Actors

Modern communication technologies have transformed spoiler behavior dramatically. Platforms such as X, Facebook, and Telegram enable rapid spread of propaganda and incitement, with social media notably intensifying ethnic tensions during the Tigray conflict (2020 - 2022). Spoilers use these tools strategically to mobilize support and polarize communities, while platform algorithms often amplify inflammatory content, creating echo chambers that deepen divisions. Encrypted messaging applications provide spoilers - particularly those in the diaspora - with secure channels to coordinate activities and evade detection. The digital ecosystem is not neutral; algorithmic design can unwittingly magnify polarization and facilitate disinformation, highlighting the importance of algorithmic accountability and digital governance reforms. Collaborative efforts between governments, civil society, and technology companies to develop fact-checking mechanisms and content moderation strategies are increasingly critical to counter spoiler influence.

Spoilers holding foreign passports leverage international mobility and legal protections to operate from abroad, complicating the Ethiopian government's capacity to address their activities. The diaspora in the US, Europe, and Canada has been implicated in spreading inflammatory content that exacerbates ethnic and political fault lines, often supporting competing narratives aligned with different regional factions. Their physical distance and protected status enable them to influence the conflict remotely with impunity.

Further complicating the picture are covert spoilers who masquerade as journalists, researchers, or civil society actors. These individuals use their platforms to undermine national dialogue efforts, spread disinformation, and sow mistrust, challenging authorities' ability to distinguish between legitimate dissent and destabilizing activity.

Managing Spoilers in Ethiopia: Strategies and Options

Since 2018, Ethiopia's government has employed a range of strategies to manage spoilers, including accommodation, dialogue, and law enforcement measures. Yet, the dynamic and evolving nature of spoilers demands a nuanced and flexible approach. Existing scholarship underscores that spoilers operate both within formal political systems and beyond, and failure to effectively address them risks undermining peace processes and democratic consolidation (Nilsson & Kovacs, 2021). Effective management requires blending traditional peacebuilding approaches with innovative measures, including enhanced digital governance and targeted diplomatic engagement - especially with diaspora host countries. The selective inclusion of spoilers whose demands remain negotiable, coupled with firm responses against maximalist spoilers pursuing uncompromising and destructive agendas, is critical. Moreover, sustainable solutions must address the underlying drivers of conflict - ethnic grievances, economic marginalization, and historical injustices - rather than merely containing spoiler activities.

It is also essential to recognize the ethical dilemmas inherent in managing spoilers. Engaging with violent or extremist spoilers risks legitimizing harmful agendas, while overly repressive tactics can alienate moderates and exacerbate conflict.

Striking a balance between security imperatives and democratic freedoms remains a persistent challenge. Finally, successful management hinges on multi-level approaches that incorporate grassroots peace committees, regional actors, and international partners. Integrative frameworks that combine security, political, social, and economic tools, and prioritize local ownership and inclusive governance, offer the most promising pathways toward mitigating spoiler impact and advancing peace in Ethiopia.

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Transcending the Ethio-Eritrean Conundrum: A Vision for a Better Tomorrow

By Ambassador Dina Mufti, MP & Member of Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs, House of the People's Representatives of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

The European Inspiration

In his remarks delivered when the EU received the Nobel Peace Prize, Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, had this to say about how Germany and France transcended generations of animosity to bring about enduring peace in Europe;

“To think of what France and Germany had gone through ..., and then take this step ... Signing a Treaty of Friendship ... Each time I hear these words - Freundschaft, Amitié -, I am moved. They are private words, not for treaties between nations. But the will to not let history repeat itself, to do something radically new, was so strong that new words had to be found.”

This courage to “do something radically new” was necessary to not repeat the cycle of violence and vengeance that had engulfed the European continent. The vision of figures like Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman was critical in transforming the conflict between Germany and France. Had these important figures approached the challenging question of how to secure peace in post-World War II Europe in the same manner that France has approached the issue in the aftermath of the First World War, the outcome probably would have been a similar descent into another round of hostilities. Fortunately, the bold vision of these towering figures to bring together nations that have waged war against one another for so long has yielded peace and prosperity not just for Germany and France but for the whole of Europe.

The journey of the European Union is difficult, still inspiring for countries in the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopia and Eritrea, to emulate.

A Look Back at History

In modern times, there have been so many wars in the Ethiopia-Eritrean theater that it is very difficult to keep track. Due to the strategic significance of the Eritrean coastline, Ottomans, Egyptians, Italians, the British, and the Americans have at one time or another had a presence along this coastline, and some have even tried to control it by force. This has resulted in conflicts with the local population and rulers.

Most consequential was the Italian occupation of Eritrea, which had lasted for more than half a century and contributed to the rise of a distinct Eritrean identity. After the Italians left in 1941, they were replaced by the British, who ruled Eritrea initially as an occupied enemy territory and later on as a UN Protectorate. In 1952, the British mandate came to an end, and Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia based on a UN General Assembly resolution. The federation was a compromise between the competing demands for autonomy and unity, which were two sentiments widely reflected among the Eritrean public, as ascertained by a UN Commission tasked with providing a recommendation on Eritrea's future. Based on the recommendation of this commission which included representatives from Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan, and South Africa, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia and had its internal government structure, including its representative assembly.

However, Eritrea's democratic constitution and self-government were at odds with the Ethiopian empire's absolute monarchy. This anomalous reality could have been resolved by democratizing the rest of the Ethiopian state. However, Emperor Haile Selassie opted to resolve this incongruity by orchestrating the dissolution of the Eritrean self-administration and turning Eritrea into just another province within his empire. Thus, just ten years after its formation, the federation came to an end. This was a blow to many pro-Ethiopia Eritreans who have advocated for unity with Ethiopia under a federal arrangement. The loss of the constitutional rights and democratic institutions that Eritreans have come to enjoy in the federal arrangement prescribed by the UN angered even those whose sentiments were inclined towards union with Ethiopia. This development emboldened those who had from the very beginning advocated for the formation of an independent Eritrean state. With the support of countries in the region who, for their geopolitical considerations, support the secession of Eritrea, the nascent independence movement gained strength and became a formidable insurgency.

When Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in a coup, the titular military head of state who replaced him was an Eritrean General called Aman Andom. General Aman tried to pursue a negotiated solution to end the Eritrean insurgency and secession movement. However, his peace overtures were viewed as treasonous by hardliner elements within the provisional military administration.

The hardliners used this as an excuse to execute General Aman and launched a brutal military campaign against Eritrean insurgents. The brutality of the campaign and the inept political messaging that accompanied it fueled the separatist movement. President Mengistu, who emerged as the ultimate leader of the Provisional Military Administration, was initially reluctant to engage in negotiations to find a political solution to the conflict. By the time he expressed readiness to negotiate, it was too late. His government was toppled by a consortium of rebels, chief among which was the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), colloquially known as Shabia. Not only has the EPLF kicked the central government completely out of Eritrea, but it managed to partner with various ethnic rebel groups to take over the whole of Ethiopia. A key partner of the EPLF in this endeavor was the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (the TPLF).

The Complex History of TPLF and EPLF

The two liberation fronts have a very complex and long history together. In addition to ethnic and linguistic commonalities, both fronts fought side by side against the central government. The founders of the TPLF received critical support, including training and arms, from the EPLF at the inception of their armed struggle. On the other hand, the TPLF provided the support that enabled EPLF to survive the Red Star campaign launched by the central government, which nearly vanquished the EPLF. Therefore, both organizations could claim that one would not be in existence had it not been for the support of the other. However, their relationship has not always been friendly and symbiotic. EPLF, which is a much older organization, considers itself to be more sophisticated, organized, and superior to the TPLF. This superiority complex of the EPLF mirrors the broad attitude of Eritreans towards their southern cousins. On the other hand, the EPLF was viewed by many within the TPLF as being undemocratic and lacking in progressive credentials. Despite their occasional squabbles, both organizations were able to fight side by side and effectively dismantle the central government led by Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam.

Mengistu Hailemariam, who relied heavily on the military, technical, and financial support of the former USSR, could not resist the rebels once the USSR collapsed. Therefore, in 1991, he fled to Zimbabwe leaving the Ethiopian state in shambles.

After the demise of Mengistu's dictatorship, the EPLF and the TPLF parted ways, with the EPLF forming an independent Eritrean state through a secession formalized by a referendum. The TPLF formed a government in Addis Ababa, assuming the task of reorganizing and rebuilding the Ethiopian state. The new governments in Addis Ababa and Asmara, former comrades in arms, had friendly relations in the early 1990s. The TPLF-led government in Addis Ababa wholeheartedly facilitated the Eritrean secession and was the first to formally recognize Eritrea as an independent state. Meles Zenawi, the new ruler of Ethiopia, was an articulate and passionate champion of Eritrean independence. This was demonstrated in his address during a ceremony held in Eritrea to celebrate Eritrean independence. Meles addressed the crowd in Tigrigna, which is his mother tongue and a language widely spoken both in northern Ethiopia and in Eritrea.

In the early 1990s, the rapport and bond of history that existed between TPLF and EPLF were very exceptional and seemed quite strong. But this era of friendship did not last even a decade. War broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998.

The Ethiopia-Eritrean War of 1998-2000 and Its Aftermath

Although the border town of Badme was *casus belli*, everyone who followed the relationship of the two countries knew better than to assume that the war was really about the border. The real reason for the war was the shifting power dynamics between TPLF and EPLF. TPLF, having assumed control of the bigger and more populous Ethiopian state, was not willing to play the role of the junior partner to the EPLF anymore. Especially, some within the senior TPLF leadership who had always felt slighted by the superiority complex of the EPLF wanted to adopt a more assertive posture towards Eritrea. In the aftermath of Eritrean independence, there was not a serious effort to formalize and regulate the economic relationship between the two countries. Eritreans continued to operate within the Ethiopian economy as if Eritrean independence had not happened.

The two countries used the same currency, and their economy functioned as if they had a single market and customs union, although no such arrangement was formally put in place.

On the other hand, immediately after Eritrean independence, Ethiopians were evicted en masse from Eritrea. Most of these Ethiopians were from the Tigray region, which was the constituency of the TPLF. The lopsided economic relationship was perceived as enabling the extraction of Ethiopian resources by a predatory Eritrean state. To put an end to this, the Government in Addis Ababa introduced a new currency, and the regional administration in Tigray also started enforcing customs and border controls. The Eritrean government was not pleased with this development and wanted to maintain the status quo as far as the economic relationship between the two countries was concerned. This relationship privileged Eritrean economic interest and was beneficial to the newly independent Eritrea.

The business model adopted by government-affiliated Eritrean businesses was a lucrative one in which they buy Ethiopian commodities in Ethiopian currency and export these products internationally, earning much-needed hard currency to finance Eritrean industrialization. The output of Eritrean factories would then be sold in the vast Ethiopian market without any trade barrier or hindrance. However, Ethiopian businesses did not have a similar privilege in Eritrea.

While the TPLF leadership initially had to tolerate this anomalous relationship in the first few years of its incumbency, the longer they stayed in power and the more confident they became in their role as rulers of the Ethiopian state, senior TPLF figures started pushing back against this arrangement. President Isayas of Eritrea was certain that, given the superior military capabilities of Eritrea then, he would be able to impose any arrangement that he saw fit on Ethiopia. This was a huge miscalculation. Although the TPLF was not at first prepared to withstand the Eritrean military onslaught, within a few months, the TPLF was able to mobilize the Ethiopian public and field a huge army to fend off Eritrean troops from northern Ethiopia. This occasion also offered an opportunity to the TPLF and its coalition of ethnic parties to present themselves as a pan-Ethiopian political entity defending the sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ethiopia.

Ultimately, the Ethiopian government led by the TPLF prevailed in the two-year conflict and was able to dislodge the Eritrean army from all the border areas that it occupied.

In the aftermath of the war, there was a split within the TPLF. The split revolved around whether or not the Ethiopian army should have gone all the way to Asmara to bring about a regime change. Some advocated that the Ethiopian army should retake the Assab port. But Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who opposed the more adventurous proposals of his colleagues within the TPLF, won the day and purged his rivals from the party. Despite the restraint Prime Minister Meles showed by not heeding the popular demand to let the Ethiopian army take the war to Asmara, President Isayas was not one to show any gratitude. For the next twenty years, Eritrea continued arming and training all sorts of rebel groups and even jihadists in Somalia with the hope of destabilizing the Ethiopian state.

These activities resulted in Eritrea's international isolation and its subjection to UN sanctions. Eritrea continued on a war footing, forcing soldiers in its conscript army to provide indefinite military service. The whole state and society were completely militarized. Veteran EPLF figures who questioned the wisdom of such policies and who called for democratic reforms in the aftermath of the war were arrested without any charges or trial. These senior political figures are still believed to be in captivity and not even their families are sure if they are alive or dead. The aftermath of the war resulted in purges and political turmoil both in Ethiopia and Eritrea. But these effects were long-lasting in Eritrea. A Bunker mentality and the absolute dictatorship of President Isayas reduced Eritrea into a garrison state with a sizable portion of its population fleeing the country, turning Eritrea into one of the biggest sources of refugees and asylum seekers globally. The dream of Eritrean liberation turned into a nightmare of servitude.

The Rapprochement and the Discordant Note

The standoff between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 war lasted for 18 years. Meles Zenawi, who was once a friend, then an archnemesis of President Isayas died while in office in 2012. Meles was succeeded by Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, during whose six years tenure things stayed pretty much as they were on the Eritrean front.

However, when Hailemariam Desalegn stepped down and Abiy Ahmed assumed the premiership in Addis Ababa, a dramatic shift occurred. Prime Minister Abiy, in his inaugural address to parliament as the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, on his very first day in office, proclaimed his intention to make peace with Eritrea.

This message sent shockwaves throughout the Horn of Africa. Eager to emerge from the isolation and opprobrium in which he was wallowing, President Isaias quickly accepted the call for peace issued by the new Ethiopian Prime Minister. At a dizzying speed, things that seemed impossible to imagine just a few months ago occurred in quick succession. Direct flights resumed between the two capitals, and direct telecom connection was made possible. Families separated for two decades were united. The Prime Minister of Ethiopia received a rockstar reception from the public in Asmara, and the Eritrean President received a rapturous welcome in Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian Prime Minister received a Nobel Peace Prize for his peace initiative.

However, during the honeymoon of the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement, there was a discordant note coming from Mekelle, the regional capital of the Tigray region. Abiy's rise to the premiership in Addis Ababa was not a smooth affair. The TPLF bosses and veterans who had become even more dominant and fractious after the death of Meles Zenawi did not want Abiy as Prime Minister. In Hailemariam, they had a compliant premier who did their bidding more often than not. They knew that Abiy was cut from a different cloth. So, they bitterly opposed his election as the chairperson of the EPRDF, the consortium of ethnic parties founded by the TPLF. Despite their opposition, Abiy outmaneuvered them and became chairperson of the party and Prime Minister of the Federal Government. Consolidating his hold on power, he also merged eight ethnic and regional parties into one pan-Ethiopian political party.

Disgruntled and aggrieved by the rise of the new Prime Minister, who soon started to assert his power as head of government, the TPLF bosses decamped to Mekelle. Most consequential would be the former spy boss. The powerful security chief, Getachew Assefa, who had served as head of the National Intelligence and Security Services for almost two decades, had attempted to forestall the rise of Abiy. A few months after Abiy was sworn in, Getachew was dismissed from his post and did not waste any time before he took off to Mekelle.

Publicly lambasted for human rights violations and other abuses of power, Getachew Assefa and other TPLF veterans assembled in Mekelle and started to plot Abiy's downfall and their comeback to power.

Given the TPLF's overwhelming dominance in Ethiopia's security machinery, Getachew Assefa and company were confident that they could make Abiy's rule short and turbulent. Getachew's operatives directly and indirectly instigated communal clashes along ethnic and religious lines across Ethiopia. They engaged in economic sabotage measures and media campaigns to discredit the new government. Underestimating Abiy's staying power, the TPLF, under the shadow leadership of Getachew and with the support of the TPLF elite who felt marginalized by the new Prime Minister, conducted an intense campaign to delegitimize and topple Abiy. When this campaign failed, the TPLF leadership resorted to an actual military campaign intending to dislodge Abiy's Prosperity Party from power.

Bereft of experienced military commanders who were veterans of the TPLF insurgency days, the TPLF strategists did not think that the Ethiopian National Defense Force would be able to offer much resistance.

The War in Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea's Role

This internal conflict between Ethiopian political forces that degenerated into an outright civil war gave President Isayas a golden opportunity. Siding with the Federal forces, he sent his troops into the Tigray region tipping the scale in favor of the Government. Eritrean troops, however, were not there just to fight against TPLF alongside federal troops. The Eritrean government used this opportunity to unleash a systematic campaign of atrocities and looting. This was not just revenge for perceived or real wrongs committed against Eritrea during the Ethiopia-Eritrean war. This also seemed to be a desperate and cynical attempt to drag back the Tigray region and undo years of socio-economic progress, which has turned the Eritrean government green with envy. The conflict in northern Ethiopia suited President Isayas just fine. Most of the actual fighting was between Ethiopians. His forces got to choose whether to fight or not, depending on which direction the tides were going. When the federal forces got the upper hand, Eritrean troops would offer assistance, take the credit for the victory. They remain in place to pillage and plunder while federal troops move forward to the next front.

When the TPLF forces gained the upper hand, Eritrean forces chose to abandon Ethiopia's federal troops and move closer to their border. Either way, as Ethiopians tear their country apart, Isayas enjoyed the show and had his troops take part in the war in his terms to loot and kill as they pleased.

For Isayas, not just the demise of the TPLF, but the weakening of the whole Ethiopian state through a debilitating internal conflict was manna from heaven.

The Pretoria Agreement and the Realignment

Therefore, President Isayas was not too pleased with the signing of the Pretoria accord and the end of the conflict between the TPLF and the Federal Government. President Isayas had on numerous occasions expressed his unhappiness with the Pretoria agreement, which he viewed as a US-imposed truce that saved TPLF from extinction.

Once the Pretoria agreement was signed, Isayas became weary of the Federal Government, which had opted for peace instead of continuing the fighting as was his preference and recommendation. Always considering himself as a senior partner, be it with the TPLF or the Federal Government, Isayas was angry with Abiy for making peace with the TPLF. He was also suspicious that if the peace forged by the Pretoria agreement holds, a resurgent TPLF aligned with the Federal Government could turn their collective might against him. Prime Minister Abiy's public pronouncements expressing his conviction that Ethiopia needs to gain a more secure access to the sea had also rung alarm bells in Asmara. Therefore, President Isayas started to make peace overtures towards the TPLF leadership.

While most of the leadership within the TPLF are, by and large, very hostile to the Eritrean government, there were some with a more pragmatic bent of mind who argued that an alliance with the Eritrean government is necessary for the TPLF to have a better bargaining position vis-à-vis the Federal Government. Dissatisfied with the settlement reached in the Pretoria Agreement, Getachew Assefa and Fetlework Gebregziabher, supported by some TPLF Generals, successfully allied with the Eritrean government against the Federal Government. Their calculation when going into the new alliance is based on their belief that had it not been for the support of the Eritrean government, the Federal Government would not have been able to defeat the TPLF.

Therefore, they are convinced that if the Eritrean government supports them or stays neutral in their fight against the federal government, they could prevail in any military confrontation with the federal government.

As the established patron of all Ethiopian armed and rebel groups, the Eritrean government also brings to the table a network of ethnic armed movements that could cooperate with the TPLF in its renewed effort to topple Abiy Ahmed.

This move by the hardcore TPLF faction is not very popular among the general public in the Tigray region. In fact, many senior political and military figures, including Getachew Reda, the former President of the Interim Administration of the Tigray Region, and General Tsadqan Gebretensai, two leading figures who had led the TPLF delegation in the Pretoria negotiations, had a fallout with the TPLF over this issue.

Getachew Reda, a charismatic political figure with a sizable following among the youth in Tigray, has formed a new political party and has joined the federal government as a Minister. However, Getachew and Tsadqan are not isolated figures. Their revulsion against the alliance between TPLF and the Eritrean government is widely shared in Tigray. Therefore, TPLF politicians and military figures who have fought together against the Federal Government now find themselves in opposing camps. The Eritrean government, which was aligned with the Federal Government against the TPLF, is now aligned with the TPLF against the Federal Government.

These shifting alliances and head spinning changes regarding who is an enemy and a friend become even more bewildering if one adds to the equation the Fano and OLA, which are ethnic militant groups claiming to represent the Amhara and Oromo ethnic communities, which are the second and first most populous ethnic groups in Ethiopia. The Eritrean government arms and actively supports both the OLA and FANO, even when it was on relatively good terms with the federal government. As complex and as bizarre as this saga appears, it is not without its logic. It is not just senseless fighting. There are competing interests and narratives, competing visions and aspirations. Eritrea and northern Ethiopia have been the site for brutal conflicts for more than half a century, with brief respites during which grievances are nurtured and preparations are made for the next round of war.

So, the question is, what is the solution? What is the best *modus vivendi* for Ethiopia and Eritrea? Many hoped that separation and independence would mean an end to a 30-year conflict during which Eritrean secession movements waged a bitter struggle for Eritrean independence. The 30 years since independence have proved to be equally tumultuous and bloody.

Transcending the Conundrum: Envisaging an Ethiopian-Eritrean Union

At the bottom of this 60 plus years of conflict and tragedy lies a conundrum. The conundrum is the fact that on the one hand, Ethiopians and Eritreans are too alike and too intertwined in every aspect of life making a completely separate existence virtually impossible. Ethiopia and Eritrea could never be like any other normal neighbors.

At the same time, Eritrea and Ethiopia cannot be easily united into one political unit or state since the distinct colonial history and identity of Eritreans, which is reinforced by the sacrifices of a long and bitter national liberation movement, would make even a confederation between the two countries very difficult, at least in the foreseeable future. As President Isayas's running commentary on Ethiopia's internal politics demonstrates, Eritrea wants to have its cake and eat it too, when it comes to independence.

At times, it seems Eritrea wants to be both inside and outside of Ethiopia. The Eritrean President often conducts interviews and gives long-winded speeches that are so focused on Ethiopia's internal affairs and make him appear to be a leader of an Ethiopian opposition movement. Ethiopians also seem to be afflicted with a permanent longing for the coastline and access to the sea that they had enjoyed through Eritrea. There is both a sentimental, economic, and security logic behind this aspiration for access to the sea.

In short, both sides do not seem to be at ease with the idea of being two independent, separate states having normal diplomatic relations as two neighboring countries. At the same time, there does not seem to be a willingness to explore a federal or confederal union. So perhaps the only remaining option worth exploring seriously is cooperation and integration through the creation of a supranational organization tailored to meet the unique needs of both Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Given the long history of conflict, the lack of trust, and a deficit of institutional capacity, rule of law, and stable governance structures to sustain a cooperative framework based on agreed upon rules and procedures, any attempt to forge a supranational union between Ethiopia and Eritrea has to be incremental and must be nurtured with great care. At the same time, inactivity and passivity could pave the way for the cycle of violence and conflict to repeat itself for generations to come. Therefore, one should not procrastinate and wait for the ideal time to start discussions on what a future Ethiopian-Eritrean supranational union should look like. Such a Union between the two countries should have the following four pillars;

- An Economic Integration
- A Political Council
- A Security and Defense Cooperation
- A Cultural and Social Dimension

1. Economic Integration:

The most important pillar of an Ethiopian-Eritrean Union would be economic integration. Such integration could start with a customs union and evolve to include a single market that facilitates the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital. As the economic integration matures, a monetary union could also be considered. The details of such economic integration have to be carefully negotiated to ensure that it is mutually advantageous and beneficial for both countries. Unless the formula for integration is fair and benefits both countries, it cannot be sustainable. Naturally, be it with a customs union or a single market with a bigger and more dynamic economy, the Eritrean economy would benefit immensely. Eritrean businesses will gain easy access to the huge Ethiopian market. The freedom of people to move would also be quite advantageous to Eritreans. Hence, an Ethiopian-Eritrean Union, besides its peace dividend, has to be made attractive to the Ethiopian public. The most obvious way of doing this would be to ensure that, as part of the package, Ethiopia would get to develop, manage, and utilize the Assab port. In such an arrangement Ethiopia will be entitled to enjoy an exclusive right over the Assab port as one of its main maritime outlets. Given the geographic location of the Assab port, which is closer to Ethiopian rather than Eritrean population centers, this would not be a huge concession to make for the Eritrean state.

To operationalize the economic aspects of the Union, which would necessitate a great deal of regulatory work and harmonization as well as day-to-day administrative work, a treaty-based supranational entity formed by the two states should be put in place. This entity, which could be a commission or a high authority and would have executive and administrative powers emanating from a treaty and superseding the governments of both states when it comes to its narrowly drawn scope of authority. This economic cooperation would form the nucleus of a peaceful and enduring partnership between the two countries. Such a partnership could in due course expand to include other countries in the Horn of Africa.

2. A Political Council

To steer any enduring partnership between the two countries, there should be a platform for political consultation and coordination that would steer the union as a joint political project. Political councils at the head of government and ministerial levels could also be established to provide political oversight to the work of the executive entity running the economic cooperation.

The political councils could also be instrumental in buttressing economic integration through continuous political dialogue and engagement. However, the political councils would not have any authority over the internal political affairs of both countries. These would remain within the sovereign domain of both states. Besides being forums for providing political guidance and overseeing the inevitable bureaucracy that emerges in the economic integration track, these councils could also serve as platforms for political consultation on a range of issues. Such institutionalized consultations and dialogues could slowly engender trust and understanding. The political councils could also provide a forum for policy coordination on diplomatic and security issues. Such coordination would also be critical for effective security and defense cooperation.

3. Security and Defense Cooperation

Security and defense cooperation could be another key pillar of an Ethiopian-Eritrean Union. Both states have relatively strong-armed forces and considerable security capabilities. If coordinated and brought together, the defense and security apparatus of the two states could play a very instrumental role in promoting peace and security in the entire Horn of Africa. An institutionalized, robust, and principled partnership between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the defense sector could provide the capabilities needed to undertake effective counterterrorism and peacekeeping missions in various parts of the African continent. This kind of cooperation could also contribute to maritime security and anti-piracy initiatives along the Red Sea. However, any sustainable and effective security and defense cooperation between Ethiopia and Eritrea should be based on agreed-upon principles and broad policy objectives and goals.

At the operational level, there could also be mechanisms that foster compatibility, mutual intelligibility, and interoperability between the armed forces and security services of the two countries. At a political level, a strong commitment to advance common objectives and peace and stability in the Horn of Africa should be the anchor of the cooperation.

4. Cultural and Social Dimension

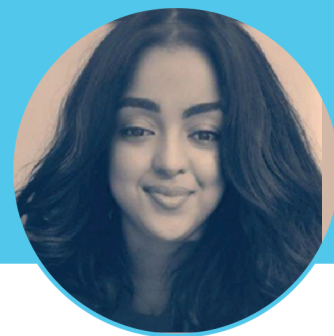
On the cultural and social dimension, the social and cultural ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea have proved to be very enduring and resilient.

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Emerging Geometries of Power and Multilateral Norms: The UN's New Face in the Horn of Africa

By Blen Mamo, Executive Director, Horn Review



On 17 July 2025, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres appointed Guang Cong of China as the UN Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, marking an unprecedented milestone as the first Chinese national to assume this strategically significant post (United Nations, 2025). While the UN's leadership has historically drawn from a diverse array of geographic origins, Cong's elevation signals a pronounced recalibration of the institutional architecture - reflecting China's transition from predominantly bilateral engagements to a substantive presence within multilateral governance in a region of escalating geostrategic importance. Succeeding Ghana's Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, Cong brings over two decades of seasoned experience across complex peace operations in South Sudan, Darfur, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, most recently serving as Deputy Special Representative and Deputy Head of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS, 2023).

This professional pedigree, rooted in both deep regional familiarity and institutional acumen, equips him with a nuanced understanding of the interplay between sovereign prerogatives and the imperatives of multilateral peacebuilding. China's historical posture within the UN - as a permanent Security Council member

- has been characterized by cautious engagement, often privileging bilateral state-to-state diplomacy. Cong's appointment, therefore, constitutes a discernible inflection point, embodying Beijing's strategic intent to articulate and operationalize its influence through the normative frameworks of multilateral institutions.

This approach enables China to exert soft power not through coercive conditionalities but via the legitimacy conferred by the UN's institutional mandate, thereby advancing a vision of sovereignty, development, and conflict resolution consonant with its diplomatic ethos. The Horn of Africa, a crucible of geopolitical contestation, has attracted intensified attention from a constellation of external actors including Gulf states, Russia, the European Union, the United States, and China itself (International Crisis Group, 2023). In this context, Cong's ascendancy to a high-profile UN envoy role carries profound symbolic resonance and practical implications. It may recalibrate regional perceptions of the UN, particularly among states historically skeptical of Western conditionalities and more receptive to China's doctrine of non-interference and development-centric partnership (Sun, 2022).

Nonetheless, entrenched political complexities and longstanding regional fault lines constrain the pace and extent of perceptual shifts. This appointment also embodies the UN's tentative but meaningful adaptation to an increasingly multipolar international order, challenging the West's post-Cold War hegemony over senior diplomatic appointments traditionally leveraged to project Western normative frameworks under the guise of multilateral legitimacy.

While Cong's tenure does not herald an outright overturning of the existing power hierarchy, it is emblematic of a gradual diffusion of influence within the UN system, incrementally decentering Western preeminence. This evolution raises salient normative questions concerning the durability and interpretation of foundational UN mediation principles - such as inclusivity, human rights, and democratic governance - as non-Western actors assume more prominent operational roles.

Far from a mere token appointment, Cong's dual identity as a former Chinese foreign ministry official and an experienced UN operative positions him uniquely to mediate the fraught interface between the inviolability of state sovereignty and the exigencies of international norms. In a region acutely sensitive to external interference, such hybridity may afford him enhanced diplomatic dexterity.

More broadly, China's trajectory reflects a paradigmatic shift from external influence exerted via financial instruments and alternative institutional platforms toward direct engagement with the core mechanisms of global governance. The integration of Chinese leadership at the envoy echelon may bolster the UN's legitimacy amid changing power configurations but simultaneously tests its capacity to reconcile divergent diplomatic doctrines.

The appointment underscores an ongoing diversification of the UN's leadership mosaic, mirroring a global governance landscape increasingly characterized by pluralism. Although Western influence endures, it must now accommodate competing normative paradigms emphasizing sovereignty, developmental pragmatism, and non-interference - principles that resonate with Beijing's longstanding positions and, importantly, find selective consonance within the UN's foundational charter.

Operationally, it remains axiomatic that no single envoy - regardless of nationality - can surmount the structural constraints that circumscribe the UN's efficacy in fragile theatres: chronic underfunding,

limited political leverage, and the prerogatives of host states. Yet Cong's appointment may recalibrate the UN's relational dynamics, engendering enhanced access and credibility with regional actors disillusioned with Western-centric conditionalities.

This could precipitate a paradigmatic shift toward a development-oriented conception of peace and security, privileging state-led stability over externally imposed liberal state-building models. The ultimate impact will hinge on the UN's capacity to leverage Cong's position to refine its modalities - prioritizing localized diplomacy, patient engagement with entrenched regimes, and integrative strategies bridging humanitarian, development, and political mandates. If successfully navigated, the UN could reaffirm its role as a neutral arbiter, adapting its *modus operandi* without diluting its normative commitments.

Viewed through a wider lens, this appointment encapsulates a fundamental transformation in multilateral diplomacy. China is no longer a peripheral actor shaping outcomes from the margins but a core constituent contesting the procedural and normative underpinnings of international governance. The UN, for its part, appears poised - albeit cautiously - to recalibrate its institutional ethos to reflect a more dispersed distribution of power and legitimacy.

For Western policymakers, these developments demand a strategic recalibration. Sustaining influence within multilateral institutions will require moving beyond entrenched networks toward coalition-building, operational excellence, and systemic reform. Engagement with China must be pragmatic - neither acquiescing to nor antagonizing its ascendancy - to safeguard the functionality, credibility, and inclusivity of the multilateral order. Guang Cong's appointment thus neither signals the eclipse of Western influence nor its unchallenged perpetuation. Rather, it inaugurates a phase in which the geometry of global leadership is increasingly polycentric. His tenure will serve as a litmus test for the capacity of emergent powers to contribute constructively to conflict resolution under UN auspices and for established actors to adapt to an evolving international milieu.

Ethiopia's status as China's most significant and steadfast regional partner in the Horn of Africa imbues Guang Cong's appointment with particular resonance for Addis Ababa. As Beijing's "all-weather friend,"

Ethiopia has benefited from robust bilateral ties characterized by extensive infrastructure investments, trade relations, and political support. However, this privileged partnership exists within a broader regional tapestry where China also maintains pragmatic relations with Ethiopia's adversaries, including Eritrea and Sudan, thus underscoring Beijing's strategic balancing act aimed at preserving influence across competing Horn states.

In this context, Cong's role as UN Special Envoy demands a delicate disentanglement of national affiliations from multilateral responsibilities. While his Chinese heritage and intimate understanding of Beijing's regional priorities may afford Ethiopia enhanced access and subtle diplomatic leverage within the UN framework, Cong's mandate compels impartiality and the pursuit of collective peace and stability objectives (United Nations, 2025). Addis Ababa must leverage the potential for a more development-oriented and sovereignty-conscious approach to peacebuilding - aligned with Beijing's philosophy - while pursuing a diversified regional strategy that balances its close ties to China with pragmatic cooperation across the Horn's complex political ecosystem. This calibrated approach will be pivotal in advancing Ethiopia's regional ambitions and securing durable stability (Sun, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Ultimately, Cong's appointment presents Ethiopia with a strategically auspicious opportunity: a UN envoy whose intimate understanding of Chinese policy paradigms may engender a heightened receptivity to Ethiopia's regional aspirations. Concurrently, Ethiopia must deftly engage with the envoy's multilateral mandate, which necessitates equitable consideration of competing regional actors and adherence to the principles of impartiality.

This dynamic invites a nuanced diplomatic posture - one that capitalizes on the conduit for deeper engagement while navigating the intricate architecture of multilateral peacebuilding and regional stability.

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Despite the recurrent wars and the harrowing pain and suffering these wars have caused in both countries, somehow the cultural and social ties between the two countries are still very strong. Nevertheless, it could still be strengthened further and serve as a backbone for the cooperation in other sectors. Therefore, a conscious effort should be made to promote interactions between religious and cultural institutions from both countries. Youth exchange programs and other forms of promoting mutual understanding and solidarity should also be put in place. Reconciliation and friendship where there are much pain and suffering in the background would not be easy. Therefore, there should be a unit attached to the executive organ that coordinates the economic integration tasked with the cultural and social dimensions of the integration. If the two states just open the borders and lift all the restrictions, society from both sides will do much of the work in the cultural and social sphere. Nevertheless, there is a need to have an institutional mechanism within the Union to encourage and promote cultural and social ties between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The vision outlined above would require bold leadership from both sides. It will also require the support and democratic assent of the citizenry in both countries.

The role of domestic actors, be it governments, other political actors, or civil society, is indispensable. The Government of Eritrea and Ethiopia are the principal actors without whose leadership this vision can never be realized. However, one cannot ignore the role of international actors for the realization of this vision. Visionary and bold leadership was not enough for Germany and France to overcome their challenges in the post WWII Europe. America's political, economic, and security support was also essential. The support of the international community is also important in the context of the Horn of Africa. The international community, including western countries, gulf countries, as well as countries like China and Russia, could support this vision in various ways. Politically, the international community could start by vocally supporting and championing this vision as a long-term framework and bedrock for durable peace in the horn of Africa.

This political support should also translate into encouragement and even pressure to nudge any recalcitrant party to seriously consider the promise of such a union. Financial support, be it in the form of infrastructure investment to strengthen an Ethiopian-Eritrean Union or other modalities that ensure its viability, will be a long-term investment in peace. The international community could also provide the necessary guarantees to assure those who might have misgivings and suspicions about what such union might entail. The international community should also denounce potential spoilers who want the Horn of Africa to remain embroiled in perpetual conflict. Such actors would refrain from their usual shenanigans only if there is a strong and unequivocal international political support in favor of this project. The time has come to transcend the Ethiopian-Eritrean conundrum through a Union that preserves the sovereignty of the two countries while enabling them to work closely for shared prosperity.



Fragile Alignments and Maritime Stakes: The Horn's Unsettled Equilibrium Post-Ankara Declaration

By Yonas Yizezew, Researcher, *Horn Review*



The Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape remains deeply complex, shaped by intersecting strategic ambitions, shifting alliances, and unresolved sovereignty questions. As regional actors seek to secure influence amid growing instability, the balance of power teeters precariously. Ethiopia's emerging maritime aspirations and its delicate engagement with Somaliland, coupled with the evolving Egypt-Eritrea-Somalia tripartite alliance, reflect a broader contestation over regional order, sovereignty, and access to critical resources. This analysis unpacks these dynamics, offering insight into the fragile diplomacy at play and the prospects for sustained stability in a region vital to both African and global strategic interests.

The Tripartite Alliance: A Strategic "Counterbalance"

The formal establishment of the Egypt-Eritrea-Somalia tripartite alliance on October 10, 2024, in Asmara, marks a significant recalibration in the Horn's strategic environment (Al Jazeera, 2024). This bloc primarily aims to counterbalance Ethiopia's increasingly assertive regional posture, notably in light of its recent naval agreement with Somaliland - a development perceived by alliance members as a challenge to existing territorial and maritime equities. Egypt's involvement is driven by concerns over

the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute, which remains unresolved despite protracted negotiations. For Cairo, bolstering military and diplomatic influence in the Red Sea corridor serves both to protect its vital Nile water interests and to reaffirm its role as a key regional power. Eritrea views the alliance as a bulwark against Ethiopia's expanding maritime reach and an affirmation of its strategic position in the Horn. Meanwhile, Somalia's participation signals a clear rejection of the Somaliland-Ethiopia naval deal, which it deems a violation of its territorial integrity and sovereignty (Somaliguadian, 2025).

Operationalizing this alliance, however, confronts substantial challenges. Egypt's military is not optimally configured for sustained extraterritorial engagements, while Somalia continues to wrestle with internal instability and the persistent threat posed by al-Shabaab. Additionally, Somalia's improving ties with Ethiopia following the Ankara Declaration have introduced complexities within the alliance, with Egypt expressing concern over Somalia's shifting alignments. This nuanced balancing act reflects the fragility of the tripartite bloc, underscoring that its cohesion remains contingent on evolving geopolitical contingencies rather than institutional solidity.

The Ankara Declaration: A Fragile Accord?

The Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed on January 1, 2024, granting Ethiopia naval access to a 20 km stretch of Somaliland's coastline in exchange for prospective recognition of Somaliland's independence, remains a pivotal point of regional tension (IISS, 2024). This agreement epitomizes Ethiopia's strategic maritime ambition, crucial for diversifying its access beyond landlocked constraints and for asserting influence in Red Sea geopolitics. Turkey's mediation culminated in the January 2025 Ankara Declaration between Ethiopia and Somalia, emphasizing mutual respect for territorial sovereignty and committing to future negotiations on commercial port arrangements (Republic of Türkiye MFA, 2025). Importantly, Somalia secured the suspension of Ethiopia's naval activities in Somaliland as a precondition, a concession Ethiopia reportedly accepted under U.S. and Turkish diplomatic pressure (African Arguments, 2025). Nevertheless, the Declaration deliberately preserves ambiguity - failing to explicitly nullify the MoU - allowing all parties to navigate domestic political pressures without overt confrontation. This diplomatic subtlety reflects Turkey's strategic mediation approach but leaves unresolved core sovereignty questions central to long-term stability. Ethiopia's nuanced reaffirmation of Somalia's sovereignty, paired with its tacit retention of maritime commitments, suggests a cautious yet firm posture designed to safeguard its strategic interests without escalating regional conflict. Should the tripartite alliance intensify pressure on Addis Ababa, Ethiopia may respond by reaffirming or even strengthening its naval accord with Somaliland, asserting its maritime prerogatives as a counterweight to encirclement narratives.

Post-Ankara Progress in Ethiopia-Somalia Relations: Steps Toward Cautious Cooperation

Since the January 2025 Ankara Declaration, Ethiopia and Somalia have embarked on a tentative yet significant path toward normalizing relations and mitigating longstanding tensions fueled by Ethiopia's prior naval agreement with Somaliland. Following the Ankara Declaration, high-level diplomatic exchanges have increased, with Ethiopian and Somali officials holding multiple bilateral meetings throughout early and mid-2025. These engagements have

focused on establishing joint technical committees to operationalize the Declaration's commitments, including suspending Ethiopia's naval presence in Somaliland and exploring mutually agreeable port access arrangements. While still in preliminary phases, these committees signal a mutual willingness to engage constructively, albeit cautiously.

Negotiations regarding Ethiopia's access to Somali port such as Bosaso have advanced incrementally. Somali authorities have expressed conditional openness to granting Ethiopia logistical and commercial privileges, contingent upon Ethiopia's respect for Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, Somalia remains adamant about rejecting Somaliland's claims to independence, which complicates Ethiopia's recalibration away from the Somaliland MoU. Consequently, Ethiopia's strategy appears to be hedging: maintaining diplomatic ties with Somaliland while simultaneously courting Somali ports, reflecting a dual-track approach that balances maritime aspirations with diplomatic prudence. Enhanced cooperation on security matters, particularly addressing the threat of al-Shabaab, has also emerged as a priority area. Both countries have initiated information-sharing protocols and coordinated border security patrols, supported by regional actors such as IGAD and Turkey. These measures aim to reduce cross-border insurgent activities and foster a collaborative security environment, although operational challenges and mutual distrust persist.

Domestic and Regional Reactions to the Rapprochement

Within Somalia, the Ankara Declaration has been met with cautious optimism. Federal authorities view the rapprochement positively, recognizing it as a diplomatic development that reinforces Somalia's sovereignty. Somaliland has expressed strong dissatisfaction, viewing Ethiopia's naval engagement with Somaliland as a critical element of its long-standing pursuit of international recognition and maritime engagement. On Ethiopia's side, while the government publicly supports renewed diplomacy, nationalist sentiments emphasize safeguarding the country's strategic interests and access to maritime routes. Regionally, Somalia's improving ties with Ethiopia have introduced complexities within the Egypt-Eritrea-Somalia tripartite alliance, with Egypt expressing concerns over Somalia's shifting alignments.

This realignment underscores the ongoing fragility of regional blocs and highlights the fluid nature of Horn of Africa diplomacy post-Ankara. Nonetheless, the broader regional environment remains volatile. Egyptian President el-Sisi's declaration that "all options are open" if water allocations from the Nile are compromised, coupled with Egypt's military drills near Sudan's border, underscores Cairo's resolute posture (OkayAfrica, 2025). Despite this, the prospect of outright military conflict over the GERD remains remote, given the catastrophic risks and the complex diplomatic entanglements involving global actors. (MadaMars, 2025).

Ethiopia continues to advocate for African-led solutions, maintaining caution towards external interventions, exemplified by its measured response to U.S. mediation offers. Turkey's growing role as mediator highlights its expanding influence in the Horn and intensifies competition with regional actors such as Egypt and the UAE, adding layers of complexity to an already intricate geopolitical fabric. A critical dimension frequently overlooked is the role of non-state actors like al-Shabaab, which exploit inter-state tensions to galvanize anti-Ethiopian sentiment within Somalia. The naval MoU with Somaliland has fueled nationalist backlash, which al-Shabaab leverages to strengthen its recruitment and operational capacity (War on the Rocks, 2024; EUAA, 2025). This dynamic underscores the intersection of sovereignty disputes with insurgency risks, further complicating prospects for durable peace.

Long-Term Trajectories and Outlook

Looking ahead, the Horn's stability hinges on several pivotal flashpoints: the operational effectiveness of the tripartite alliance, the trajectory of Ethiopia's maritime strategy, and the potential revitalization of militant groups amidst rising nationalist fervor. For regional bodies such as the African Union and IGAD, reinvigorated, coordinated multilateral diplomacy is essential. While their capacities are constrained by political divisions and resource limitations, they remain the most viable platforms for African-led conflict resolution (Crisis Group, 2024).

Turkey's mediation efforts should evolve towards inclusivity that addresses sovereignty concerns transparently rather than circumventing them. Concurrently,

renewed U.S. engagement must prioritize support for regional ownership of peace processes, avoiding heavy-handed tactics that risk exacerbating polarization. The Horn's future stability requires transcending zero-sum mentalities in favor of nuanced, collaborative diplomacy. Absent such a shift, the region risks descending from strategic rivalry to entrenched instability - an outcome no party can ultimately afford.

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Disclaimer:

This analysis aims to provide a balanced and fact-based overview of the complex geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa. Given the fluid and often contested nature of sovereignty claims, regional alliances, and diplomatic agreements, some interpretations may be subject to differing perspectives among the involved parties. The article does not endorse any particular political position or territorial claim but seeks to illuminate key developments and challenges based on publicly available information as of January, 2025. Readers are encouraged to consider the broader historical and political context and recognize that the situation continues to evolve rapidly.



Reflections on Israel-Ethiopia Relations: A Historic and Strategic Bond

By Yabsira Yeshiwas, Researcher, Horn Review



Israel and Ethiopia share a deep-rooted historical, social, and religious connection that spans millennia. This unique relationship is deeply intertwined with religious narratives, particularly those found in the ancient Ethiopian text known as the “Kebre Negest” (Glory of Kings). According to this sacred text, Ethiopian emperors and kings traced their lineage back to King Solomon of Israel, claiming descent through his union with the Queen of Sheba. The “Kebre Negest” also recounts the story of the Ark of the Covenant, believed to have been brought to Ethiopia by Menelik I, the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, along with a group of followers who are often associated with the Beta Israel community, sometimes referred to as the Falashas.

Then, the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948 marked a turning point in the region’s history, as the newly formed nation sought international recognition and alliances amidst a hostile geopolitical environment. Surrounded by neighboring states that opposed the United Nations partition plan and the very existence of a Jewish state, Israel faced significant challenges in securing its place on the global stage. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War further underscored the urgency for Israel to cultivate diplomatic relationships and strengthen its network of allies. Ethiopia emerged as a nation of particular interest to Israel, not only due to its historical and religious ties but also because of its strategic significance

in the region. Ethiopia’s complex relationship with Egypt, particularly over issues such as the Nile River and regional influence, presented an opportunity for Israel to forge a meaningful partnership.

At that time, Israel and Ethiopia have maintained a strong and strategic relationship in the military domain, marked by significant cooperation and mutual interests. During the 1960s, Israeli military advisers played a key role in training Ethiopian paratroopers and counterinsurgency units, enhancing the capabilities of the Ethiopian army. This period also saw frequent visits by senior Israeli military and security officials to Ethiopia, showing the importance both nations placed on their partnership.

A central pillar of this collaboration was their shared objective of countering the political and military influence of Arab League countries, particularly their support for the Eritrean liberation movement and Somalia’s territorial claims over the Ogaden region.

The broader context of the Cold War and the bipolar global order further shaped the dynamics of Israel-Ethiopia relations. The rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa deeply influenced the region’s geopolitics.

Ethiopia's foreign policy shifted dramatically during this period, moving from a pro-Western stance under Emperor Haile Selassie to alignment with the Soviet Union under the Derg regime. Despite this shift, Israel continued to support Ethiopia's military efforts, particularly in countering the influence of Arab forces in the region. This implicates Israel's enduring strategic interest in maintaining stability and security in the Horn of Africa, as well as its commitment to preventing the emergence of hostile powers that could threaten its own security.

When we see people to people interaction, Ethiopia became a focal point for Israel following the proclamation of the Law of Return in 1952, a landmark Israeli law granting Jews, individuals with Jewish ancestry, and their spouses the right to relocate to Israel and obtain citizenship. This law held particular significance for Ethiopia due to the presence of the Beta Israel community, who were widely recognized as having Jewish roots. Over the decades, hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians were able to immigrate to Israel under this framework, although the process faced significant challenges, especially in its early stages, when many had to undertake perilous and often illegal journeys to reach Israel. However, Israel's relationship with African states has been complicated by its ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, which has shaped a largely negative perception of Israel across the continent. During the mid-20th century, the rise of socialist ideologies in Africa further exacerbated this sentiment, as many African leaders and movements accused Israel of being an imperialist and capitalist state aligned with authoritarian regimes, such as apartheid South Africa and Emperor Haile Selassie's Ethiopia. This perception has persisted over time, influencing diplomatic relations and leading to recent developments such as the suspension of Israel's observer status in the African Union in 2023, which had been granted just two years earlier in 2021.

Algeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe have been vocal opponents of Israel's readmission to the African Union, citing their strong support for the Palestinian cause as the primary reason for their stance. These nations argue that Israel's policies toward Palestinians are incompatible with the values of the African Union, and they have consistently opposed Israel's presence within the organization. Israel, in turn, has accused these countries of being influenced by Iran, which has long been a critic of Israel and a supporter of Palestinian groups.



On the other hand, Israel enjoys significant support from several African nations, including Morocco, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Eswatini, Malawi, and Zambia. These countries have backed Israel's bid for observer status, reflecting Ethiopia's continued alignment with Israel and its strategic interests in maintaining strong bilateral ties. The strength of the relationship between Israel and Ethiopia was recently reaffirmed during a high-level meeting between Ethiopia's Foreign Minister, Gedion Timotheos, and his Israeli counterpart, Gideon Saar. This visit, which marked a significant diplomatic engagement after many years, highlighted the commitment of both nations to deepen their cooperation. In their joint press release, the two foreign ministers emphasized the importance of strengthening bilateral relations, particularly in areas such as security, agriculture, and counter-terrorism. Israel praised Ethiopia's firm stance against terrorism and expressed its willingness to collaborate closely with Ethiopia to address this shared threat.

Strengthening relations with Ethiopia is a key strategic goal for Israel by 2025, as it seeks to enhance its presence and partnerships in the Horn of Africa. And Ethiopia, as a hub for the African Union and other regional organizations, is well-positioned to play a pivotal role in renewing its stature and acceptance on the continent. The strategic interests shared between Ethiopia and Israel also, combined with Ethiopia's significant military capabilities and regional influence, can create a foundation for enduring and mutually beneficial cooperation.



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